8 AUGUST 2026 | £6.50

WWW.SPECTATOR.COM | EST. 1828

THE SPECTATOR

CANADA C$12.95. EURO ZONE €9.95.
SOUTH AFRICA ZAR139.90.
SWITZERLAND CHF10.90.

Rod Liddle

*Douglas Murray * Fraser Nelson * Boris Johnson * Sophie Winkleman*
*Michael Gove * Kemi Badenoch * William Clouston * Toby Young*

WEATHERBYS
PRIVATE BANK
We see the *person*,
not just the numbers
Banking that *knows* you

THE SPECTATOR
ESTABLISHED 1828

Cambridge has fallen

'What distinguishes Cambridge from Oxford,' A.A. Milne said in 1939, 'is that nobody who has been to Cambridge feels impelled to write about it.' Four decades later, Tom Sharpe would prove him wrong about Cantabrigian reticence with *Porterhouse Blue* – his riotous satire of the conflict between an idealistic new master and the stuffed shirts of the senior common room. It's a shame that Sharpe isn't around to enjoy the Jason Arday scandal – a farce so absurd that even he may have dismissed it as being too silly.

When Arday was announced as Cambridge's professor of sociology of education, he was lauded as the university's youngest-ever black professor. His biography had a whiff of Hollywood. Arday had been diagnosed with a developmental disorder at the age of three. He was said to be mute until he was 11 and illiterate until he was 18. But he rose from two GCSEs in P.E. and textiles to complete a PhD, raise £5.5 million by running 30 marathons in 35 days – an achievement so stirring it inspired Andy Murray – and become, in the *Guardian*'s words, 'a highly respected scholar of race, inequality and education'.

As Lara Brown writes on p18, Arday's claims have now been 'comprehensively debunked'. His published works were discovered to contain dozens of passages lifted wholesale from – or bearing an uncanny resemblance to – other academic papers; his biographical assertions were exposed as hollow and ludicrous, including a suggestion that he had starred in the TV show *Seven Up*, which began 21 years before he was born. The *Guardian* has since investigated Arday's claims, such as an assault by a masked man and an assertion that a pig's head was posted to his parents after his appointment to Cambridge. When the paper found no evidence to support these claims, they asked him for comment. 'To be honest, I thought you'd just believe me,' was Arday's reply.

Cambridge is sticking by its man. Arday, the university claims, has been the victim of 'a vile smear campaign to undermine his credibility' – or, as it is also known, journalism. As Lara points out: 'Arday's ascent is a stunning indictment not just of the incuriosity of Cambridge but its corruption.' Seemingly, 'no one ever checked Arday's academic CV, the papers he'd put out for publication or the data he used'. The best explanation is that, amid the Black Lives Matter hysteria, Cambridge hired Arday so he could be sent on 'an endless, self-flagellating media round', berating the institution for its past racism and then praising it for improving. In this role, being a fantasist was no hindrance.

The impetus must come from within universities, which have become lost in their avarice and dogmatism

Two years ago, the classicist David Butterfield wrote in these pages that Cambridge was in decline due to 'politicised teaching, grade inflation, authoritarian campus policies and lurid, even laughable, research grants'. Progressive posturing and social engineering had been put before academic standards; an expensive bureaucracy was strangling the freedom on which worthy scholarship was based; an explosion in mental health claims had stifled intellectual development. Those who dissented from Cambridge's progressive orthodoxy meanwhile had been hounded out.

Some might find the focus on one institution myopic and elitist. But Butterfield argued that the 'ambitions of our whole education system are ultimately pegged to the achievements at the very pinnacle'.

A fish rots from the head. Cambridge exemplifies flaws across British universities: grade inflation, campus wokery, academic corruption, vice-chancellor greed and a loss of purpose; Arday is part of a much wider problem.

The greatest victims of this decay are the students, paying ever more for ever less. A third of graduates are not in graduate jobs; some 45 per cent of English higher education institutions are running a deficit, with rising costs becoming harder to meet amid restrictions on student visas.

What is needed is a more ambitious university system demanding higher standards with more sustainable finances. But, while ministers can push for reform, the impetus must come from within the universities, which have become lost in their avarice and dogmatism. If they cannot find their way back, what worth is their teaching?

There were few finer critics of closed-minded, work-shy students or priggish, over-remunerated academics than the late Rod Liddle. Since this issue is a tribute to Rod, he should have the final word. In 2021, a group of Durham students walked out of a speech he gave at the institution. He wrote afterwards that British universities make 'proud proclamations of their commitment to freedom of speech followed by the immediate disavowal of that commitment, and the persecution of anyone who has taken that proclamation at face value. The kids, meanwhile, will continue hearing only one view, because who now would invite a social conservative to speak at a British university?'

Do write, p40

Irreplaceable, pp10-17, p53, & p60

Nice as pie, p58

THE WEEK

3 **Leading article**

6 **Portrait of the Week**

7 **Diary** Will I be cancelled over a short skirt?
Quentin Letts

9 **Politics** The Keminisation of the Tory party
James Heale

14 **Barometer** Academic diversity, Ceuta citizens and petrol prices

15 **Rod Liddle**
Can I fucking swear yet?

17 **Douglas Murray** Farewell, my brave and brilliant friend

21 **Madeline Grant**
Repeating the sins of the past

25 **Matthew Parris** What's so wrong about a 'dementia tax'?

27 **Mary Wakefield** The robots are coming for make-believe

28 **Letters** Class warfare, Royal Navy and an ode to Spotify

29 **Any other business** The fall of AI's shooting star
Martin Vander Weyer

Charles Moore and Deborah Ross are away.

10 **'The genuine progessive'**
Remembering Rod Liddle
Michael Gove, Boris Johnson, Fraser Nelson, Sophie Winkleman and Kemi Badenoch

13 **Rod Liddle**
'London: a celebration': a poem

14 **Good riddance, Rod**
I, for one, won't miss him
Titania McGrath

16 **Party animal**
Rod Liddle, the SDP supporter
William Clouston

18 **The fabulist**
Why is Cambridge University so eager to believe Jason Arday?
Lara Brown

19 **Paul Deaton**
'At the Crease': A poem

20 **State of the union**
Gen Z has lost faith in marriage
Lucas Chancellor

24 **Don't sue**
Prince Harry ignored the one rule
Harry Mount

26 **The hay wane**
The horse owners battling for bales
Flora Watkins

BOOKS & ARTS

BOOKS

31 **Justin Marozzi**
1453, by Anthony Kaldellis

32 **Adam Begley**
The Small Stuff, by Ian Bogost
Stuart Evers
Beginning Middle End, by Valeria Luiselli

33 **Sarah Moorhouse**
The Frenchmen, by Emily Eakin; School of the South, by Onur Erdur

34 **Guy Stagg**
Geography of Heaven, by Rory MacLean

35 **David Crane**
Overlord, by Steven Veerapen

36 **Helen Barrett**
How to Build a City, by Gabriella Bennett

37 **Annie Walton Doyle**
The Runner, by Scarlett Thomas

38 **Travis Elborough**
Days of Miracle and Wonder, by Ashley Kahn
David Edmonds
Immanuel Kant, by Robert Wicks

39 **Michael Arditti**
Where Are the Kings, by Donal Ryan

Cover Rod by Morten Morland. **Drawings** by Michael Heath, John Broadley, Tim Bales, Mark Wood, Grizelda, Nick Newman, Wilbur, Robert Thompson, K.J. Lamb, Matt Percival. www.spectator.com **Editorial and advertising** The Spectator, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP, Tel: 020 7961 0200, Email: letters@spectator.co.uk (for publication); Advertising enquiries: advertising@spectator.co.uk, Tel: 020 7961 0128 **Customer services, subscription and delivery queries** Tel: 020 4572 7556 Email: spectator@oqs.media; **Rates** for an annual subscription in the UK: £129; Europe: €229; and £229 in all other countries. To order, go to www.spectator.com/subscribe or call 020 4572 7556; **Newsagent queries** Tel: 020 7961 0200, Email: spectator@oqs.media **Distributor** Marketforce, 161 Marsh Wall, London, E14 9AP, Tel: 020 3787 9001, www.marketforce.co.uk **Vol 361; no 10,328** © The Spectator (1828) Ltd. ISSN 0038-6952 The Spectator is published weekly by The Spectator (1828) Ltd, part of Old Queen Street Ventures Ltd.
Editor: Michael Gove

ipso Regulated

Hayday, p26

Hole in one, p49

What a man, p31

LIFE

ARTS

40 **Ysenda Maxtone Graham**
In praise of postcards

42 **Classical music**
Three Choirs Festival; Hansel and Gretel; Die Fledermaus
Richard Bratby

43 **Pop**
Flaming Lips; Black Country, New Road
Michael Hann

44 **Cinema**
Holy Days
Damian Thompson

45 **Radio & podcasts**
Thames Unfiltered; Church Going, with Giles Fraser
Daisy Dunn

46 **Theatre**
Brainiac Live!; The Importance of Being Oscar
Lloyd Evans

46 **Television**
Gomorrah: The Origins
James Delingpole

LIFE

53 **Best life** *Rachel Johnson*
Real life *Melissa Kite*

54 **Dolce vita** *Nicholas Farrell*

55 **The turf** *Charlie Brooks*

AND FINALLY . . .

49 **Notes on…** Crazy golf
William Atkinson

56 **Chess** *Luke McShane*
Competition *Lucy Vickery*

57 **Crossword** *Doc*

58 **The Vintage Chef** *Olivia Potts*

59 **Drink** *Declan Lyons*
Your problems solved
Mary Killen

60 **No sacred cows** *Toby Young*
Battle for Britain *Michael Heath*

61 **Sport** *Roger Alton*
Ancient and modern
Peter Jones

62 **Seen elsewhere**
Jim Grenville
Mind your language
Dot Wordsworth

We are all hacks and we all shuffle off to Buffalo, sooner or later. One way or another.
Rod Liddle, p15

Let's hope aspiring columnists learn Rod's lesson: to be both funny and truthful, you also have to be brave.
Boris Johnson, p11

I worried about how much Rod drank and smoked – but then he'd tell me that all the best people treat their bodies like bins (and all the worst like temples).
Sophie Winkleman, p12

Not that Rod was perfect. He was a Millwall fan, after all.
Toby Young, p60

CONTRIBUTORS

Rod Liddle, who has died at the age of 66, wrote for *The Spectator* as a columnist and associate editor from 2002. An unpublished column by him is on p15.

Fraser Nelson, the *Times* columnist, was his editor for 15 years from 2009 to 2024. He describes their working relationship on p11.

Rod's friend **William Clouston** writes about their time with the Social Democratic party, of which he is leader, on p16.

Lucas Chancellor, grandson of former *Spectator* editor Alexander, is a model and a writer. He says that Gen Z have gone off marriage on p20.

Sarah Moorhouse, who is acquisition editor and research editor at Oxford University Press, reviews two new works on French theory on p33.

PORTRAIT OF THE WEEK

Home

In 19 English counties 1mm or less rain fell in July. Tom Bradshaw, the president of the National Farmers' Union, said that yields of wheat and oats were 'very, very poor'. Fire affected 375 acres of Suffolk at Dunwich Heath. Shell agreed to sell its European onshore renewables arm, including solar farms, to France's TotalEnergies. BP's profits rose to the highest since 2022, after the war in the Middle East pushed up oil prices. BP put its UK offshore oil and gas business up for sale. A trial by researchers at King's College London started recruiting 220 children aged 11 to 16 to assess puberty blockers after the High Court rejected a legal challenge.

Andy Burnham, the Prime Minister, excluded prisoners who had committed rape and serious child sex offences from an early release scheme. But two killers of PC Andrew Harper would remain eligible for release. Mr Burnham proposed that regional mayors in England should keep a share of income tax and business rates. Bev Craig, the Labour candidate, won the by-election for mayor of Greater Manchester. Reform came second; turnout was only 25 per cent. The Tories chose as a Somerset council candidate a former neo-Nazi, Joshua Bonehill-Paine, jailed for three years in 2015. Diane Abbott had the Labour whip restored. Mr Burnham went on holiday.

Nigel Farage, the leader of Reform, considered a pact with Restore Britain suggested by its leader, Rupert Lowe. Reform said that it would use the Royal Navy to stop small migrant boats in the Channel. In the seven days to 3 August, 1,211 migrants crossed the Channel and four died. The engine of a dinghy carrying 173 migrants caught fire in French waters and it was returned to shore. An Afghan national who steered a dinghy carrying 95 people to England in June was jailed for two years; an 18-year-old Sudanese national was sentenced to 18 months after piloting a boat carrying 81 people. Robert Bush, an undertaker, was sentenced at Hull Crown Court to 20 years after admitting to 67 offences, including denying 30 people a decent and proper burial. The Southport killer of three young girls, Axel Rudakubana, 19, was charged with three attacks while in prison. Rod Liddle, editor of *Today* on Radio 4 from 1998 until 2002, and thereafter a columnist for *The Spectator*, died aged 66.

Abroad

The Spanish interior minister said that 72,000 migrants (of whom at least 76 died) crossed from Morocco into the Spanish north African territory of Ceuta. Most were young men, and officials estimated that 7,000 were minors. A day later, 70,000 began to return to Morocco after Spain sent troops. Twenty-two EU states issued a letter on the need to counter 'the perception that illegal entry into the European Union is possible'.

President Donald Trump said he had cancelled 'massive' strikes against Iran. Oil prices fell as Iran and Oman discussed the Strait of Hormuz. Mr Trump earlier announced the 'complete disarmament' of Hamas followed by Israel leaving Gaza. Hamas said that handing over its heavy weapons was contingent on Israel withdrawing; a senior Israeli official said: 'There will be no IDF withdrawal from the current Yellow Line without the genuine disarmament of Hamas.' The British-Nepali mountaineer Nirmal Purja, 43, was among ten killed by an avalanche on Broad Peak in Pakistan-administered Gilgit-Baltistan.

A video showed a Ukrainian vegetable seller in Kherson being chased by a remotely operated Russian drone, fired on and badly wounded. Russia hit Kyiv with ballistic missiles, killing at least ten on one night and 14 on another. Ukraine sank a Russian-owned container ship in the Black Sea and hit the Engels strategic airfield in the Saratov region. Russia said it had hit three ships in Ukraine's part of the Black Sea, and a cargo vessel in the port of Mykolaiv. Ukraine hit a warehouse in the Vladimir region in a series of a dozen strikes on Russia's biggest online retailer Wildberries. A Ukrainian drone hit a beach near the Russian Black Sea resort of Gelendzhik and seven were reported killed. Russia suffered its highest monthly casualty rate of the war in July, with the Ukrainian army estimating 42,860 Russians killed or wounded. Fifa dropped a plan hatched by Gianni Infantino to sell commercial rights to its tournaments, including the World Cup, to private investors. Bartlomiej Kubkowski became the first person to swim the Baltic, from Sweden to Poland: 100 miles in 56 hours. CSH

DIARY

Quentin Letts

Labour MPs first tried to ban me from the Commons press gallery two decades ago, after I ridiculed Speaker ‘Gorbals Mick’ Martin. Jim Sheridan MP said I was ‘abusing the facilities’. Only later did we discover big Jim was the one abusing the facilities, sticking a £1,000 white leather bed on expenses. Now Derbyshire South’s Samantha Niblett wants my parliamentary pass revoked because I reported that a woman at Andy Burnham’s social-care speech was wearing a snortingly short skirt. She sat in front of Eyelashes Andy and crossed those pins Kenny Everett-style. I wondered if that might be why our new PM kept losing his philosophical thread. Cue a social-media hoo-hah. My comment was viewed more than a million times on X. This passed me by because I do not read X. For social media I follow James Lees-Milne’s dictum on television, that it is for appearing on, not looking at. Friends hungrily related the outrage at my hemline ‘sexism’. Bridget Phillipson, equalities minister, called me ‘debased’. Publicity-prone Stella Creasy MP complained that I ‘stared down’ on MPs ‘from the parliamentary lobby on a daily basis’, adding: ‘Shudder doesn’t begin to cover it.’ Sketchwriters are in fact gallery reporters. We do not enter the lobby, which is downstairs. Stella has been an MP for 16 years. It is odd she does not know that. As for Ms Niblett, she’s the one who in April called for a ‘summer of sex’ and duly earned the condemnation of the puritan left. First sight of a short skirt and now she’s clutching her dewlaps. Has the Nibbler been nobbled?

Sketchwriters cartoon the boobies who govern us. We deal in vanity and indignation. If we like short skirts it is because they are comical – in what they do to the men who boggle at them. Policy does not grip us. The cut of a politician’s jib is our thing, the more excessive the better. Take Bridget. At the despatch box she seems permanently cheesed-off, lip curling like grilled bacon rind. She spits disgust at Tories and glares, licking the outside of her teeth. Bridget is a hoot. Two decades ago, Gorbals Mick summoned my boss, Paul Dacre, for a reprimand. Dacre had better things to do but a *Mail* executive did give the Serjeant-at-Arms a three-bottle lunch at the Garrick. I was told to continue writing about Gorbals Mick as I wished.

For a church fête at Sollers Hope, Herefordshire, volunteers baked cakes, organised stalls and ran a dog show. One of our daughters entered Rupert, her poodle-basset cross. Infectiously cheerful, he won the waggiest tail contest. Bridget Phillipson should try it someday. She might win a box of Bonios.

THE SPECTATOR

Subscribe for only £1 a week

spectator.com/intro

020 4572 7556 quoting intro

Introductory offer. Auto-renewing payments only. $1 a week in Australia at spectator.com.au/intro

The Archbishop of Canterbury has been in Africa, yacking about how she will give away £100 million in slavery reparations. She should look closer to home. The Church of England pays quasi-slave rates to its musicians and organists, such as my wife. In Ghana the archbishop visited King Osei Tutu II of the Ashanti, who wore an off-the-shoulder dress showing beefy upper arms. Is one allowed to mention that? Osei, 76, whose throne is called the Golden Stool, was almost waggier-tailed than Rupert. So might you be if some goofy white person in a pointy hat turned up and offered millions of quid for nothing. As a former nurse, the archbishop possibly knows more about stools than she does about slavery. The King, before his enstoolment, took a management diploma from North London polytechnic and worked for the Mutual of Omaha insurance company in Toronto. He will enjoy spending millions of unearned English pounds but volunteers at rural church fêtes may wonder: ‘Why do we bother?’

Bad year in the kitchen garden. Herefordshire’s rabbits have finally overcome myxomatosis and the county is overrun. What plants the drought has not killed, rabbits have eaten. The one thing to flourish was, I thought, skirret, a medieval veg reportedly not unlike a carrot. Tiny seeds were bought from Amazon. Weeks were spent on germination. How tenderly I transplanted seedlings to a bed of pillowy compost, even if they did not look as expected. Then they flowered. Darn things aren’t skirret at all, but moss roses. Bloomin’ Amazon.

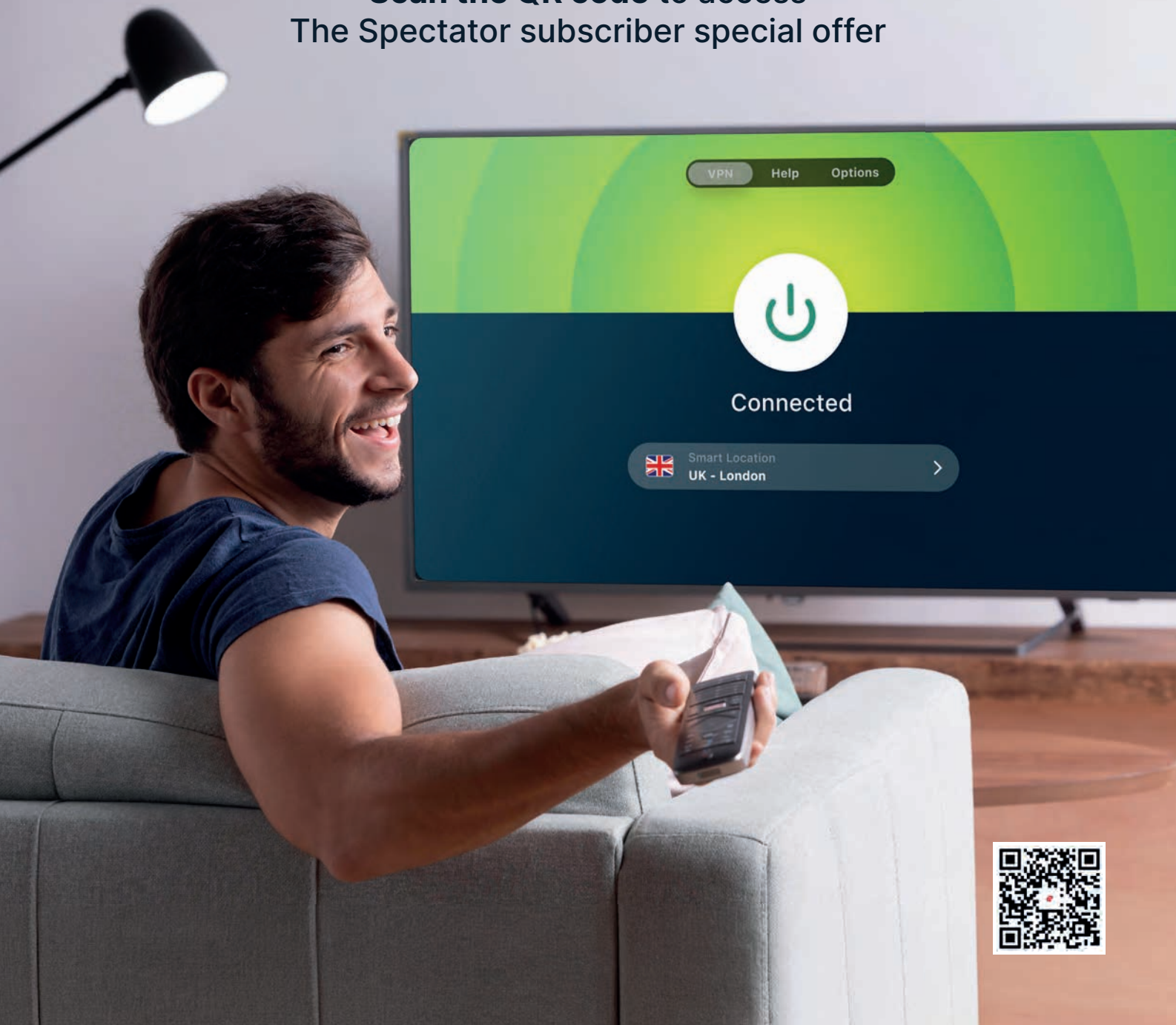
Our son and his Szechuan wife, a state-school teacher, are back for a few weeks. Communist China suits them. Their income tax is around 10 per cent, healthcare (private) is efficient, crime is low and benefit scroungers are unknown. No one wears tattoos. Private enterprise is encouraged. President Xi may not be terribly keen on sketchwriters but in that he is not alone. When banished, I know where I’m going.

Quentin Letts writes for the Daily Mail.

ExpressVPN

Looking to watch your favourite shows from anywhere in the world?

Scan the QR code to access
The Spectator subscriber special offer



The Keminisation of the Tory party

Since succeeding Rishi Sunak in November 2024, Kemi Badenoch has had two jobs to perform. Firstly, her constitutional obligation as leader of the opposition, which she has fulfilled well. In parliament, depleted Tory ranks have been marshalled effectively, harrying successive Labour notables from office by tabling questions and demanding answers from, among others, Peter Mandelson and Morgan McSweeney. Her despatch box style has impressed – though, after the departure of Keir Starmer, aides concede that a tonal shift might be necessary for the 'very different beast' that is Andy Burnham.

Now, with her position secure, it is the second task to which she must turn: her role as leader of the Conservative party. Most Tory leaders have a strained relationship with their party. Some tolerate it, others mistrust it, a few end up despising it. Badenoch is rare in that she actually likes the party she leads. She proudly speaks of her 'visceral love' for her fellow Conservatives; many of her closest relationships began while climbing its ranks. She even met her husband, Hamish, when they were both south London party activists – though that didn't stop her later kicking him off the candidates' list.

The Conservative brand, though, is badly damaged after 14 years in office. So Badenoch's team are focusing on boosting her up and her personal ratings have soared. The question now is how to translate Badenoch's popularity into wider support for the Tories.

'First change the party, then change the country,' is the traditional advice given to opposition leaders. Rather than seeking a big public bust-up such as a clause IV moment, Badenoch has opted for low-key tweaks and changes. Evolution, not revolution, has been more her style. It was her leadership rival Robert Jenrick who argued that Liz Truss should be expelled to prove the Tories had changed. Ironically, it was Jenrick's own expulsion which showed the party was firmly under her leadership.

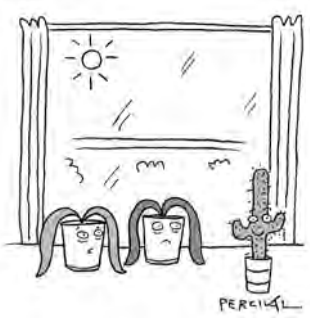
The commitment to leaving the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is a better example of Badenoch's plans. Adopting the approach of the tortoise rather than the hare allowed her to address sceptics' concerns while maintaining party unity. The Society of Conservative Lawyers was consulted; the shadow attorney general spent months on an 185-page report. 'The [David] Wolfson report was a masterclass in boiling these people alive,' is one right-winger's approving verdict. 'David is a lawyer,' jokes a more centrist cynic. 'He rewrote the question he was answering.'

As Badenoch has shifted policy rightwards, her colleagues have followed their leader's cues. Various caucuses have downed tools, heeding her plea for an end to factionalism. Her doubters are largely keeping schtum. 'No Conservative party means no One Nationers,' says one Tory, noting that the caucus has not formally met since 2024. 'Jaw jaw' has replaced 'war war', with dinners replacing public squabbling. Nick's Diner and the '92 Group, respective bastions of left and right, both recently hosted Badenoch. 'The fact that she's bothered to keep making an intellectual and thoughtful case for conservatism has really helped within the party,' says one Jenrick backer.

Various caucuses have downed tools, heeding Badenoch's plea for an end to factionalism

The challenges facing Badenoch, then, are not in parliament but outside it. Like an ancient mansion, much of the party's foundations have rotted away during decades of neglect. Two-thirds of Tory associations barely scraped the £25,000 reporting threshold for income this year. Dozens of local websites are effectively moribund. Infrastructure is sorely lacking in areas without an incumbent, with much of the north and provinces struggling to field a decent slate for this year's locals. Badenoch has held seats in London and Wimbledon but is yet to tie her southern-tinged Toryism with a northern pitch, as Boris Johnson managed to do.

The coming months are therefore intended to show, rather than tell, that the party has changed. A memorandum of understanding is being drafted for all parliamentary candidates to sign, committing them to fiscal responsibility, cutting welfare, repealing net zero and leaving the ECHR. Badenoch's willingness to talk about Islamism and integration appears to be influencing potential candidates. 'A few years ago, you'd have people ducking the cultural questions,' says one assessor. 'Now candidates are much more willing to engage in the thornier stuff.'



'He thrives in a high-pressure environment.'

The candidates' book has already been quietly rewritten. Former MPs need at least two-thirds of a selection panel to back them to stand again. Incumbents, meanwhile, require more than 50 per cent of their executive committee's votes. These are 'almost all Kemi devotees now', says one plugged-in veteran, 'and [they] love the temporary ability to wield the knife'. The next intake could look much more 'Keminised'. The 'old and the bold' could well be gently, or not so gently, encouraged to stand down. One in seven of her MPs are of pensionable age, with Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown in Wiltshire among the more vulnerable.

Party conference will be a key moment for Badenoch, a chance to broaden her pitch beyond her personal appeal. The Young Conservatives will hold hustings for a new chair amid a 50 per cent surge in young members. Much of the business world is now willing to take a second look at the Conservatives, with some £750,000 raised from the summer party and a new business club to pull in fresh support. Badenoch's office has been bolstered to back this push, with Elliot Keck, formerly of the Taxpayers' Alliance, joining to aid on economic communications.

The shadow cabinet can begin to build up their profiles, too. Mel Stride, the shadow chancellor, has been hosting policy chats over Monday-night curries; Chris Philp, the home affairs spokesman, is exploring gonzo politics with his recent run-in with the French navy. Building up others furthers the case that the Tories are a proper team: all top figures ought to be seen as 'Kemi Conservatives'.

Across the West, the centre-right is imperilled as new forces uproot traditional coalitions. From next month, the Tories move into their new headquarters in Victoria: a five-floor reminder of the political capital invested in the Conservatives' future.

The Conservative party helped make Badenoch what she is today. Now, she is remaking the party in her own image.

‘The genuine progressive’

Remembering Rod Liddle

Michael Gove

Since becoming *Spectator* editor there was one observation I heard more often from readers than any other: ‘Rod is the first page I turn to every week.’ Whatever people’s politics, background or other interests, to be a *Spectator* reader was to love Rod. Rod did his best, of course, to be unloveable. At least in print.

Nothing, and no one, apart from possibly Millwall, was spared from his criticism. Savage, foul-mouthed, merciless. But also hilarious, superbly well-informed and honest. Above all honest.

There are all sorts of enlightened souls in and around journalism who pretend to that virtue. Who claim they are speaking truth to power, fearlessly holding authority to account, exemplifying the incorruptible virtues of the fourth estate, yadda, yadda…

But all too many of them are compromised in their way – whether by a desire to avoid giving offence, or a fear of stepping too far outside the boundaries of what is considered wise and fashionable, or a wish to be well thought of by the people who count.

That was never a problem with Rod. He did not care about offending anyone, trampling over any boundary and couldn’t give a fig what the people who count thought of him. He thought they were counts anyway.

Rod believed in cutting through the cant, hypocrisy, double-speak, euphemism, evasion and empty pieties with which those in authority and those who shape our culture seek to evade proper scrutiny. He didn’t just observe that the emperor had no clothes, he pointed out that now we could see the emperor naked, it was apparent that he was a fat bastard with a tiny member who was wasting taxpayers’ money on a parade which made fools of every greaser and sycophant in the country.

Of course, Rod was strong meat for some. But it was because so many in society were intent on upholding nonsense that he knew he had to puncture it with a broadsword and then lay about the idiots responsible with fearless determination. Whether it was the idea that men could become women by wishing it so, or the belief that migration was an undiluted good, or the conviction that Islamism was not a threat, Rod took these pious fictions apart and showed that, whatever the good intentions of those peddling these noble lies, the consequences were hellish.

As my predecessor, Fraser Nelson, has observed, Rod ranks with Swift as a satirist.

Nothing and no one was spared from his criticism. Savage, merciless. But also hilarious and, above all, honest

And his work stands in the same tradition as other – historic – scourges of fashionable nonsense like William Cobbett and George Orwell. He believed that a society, and politics, built on asking people to accept what their own experience and eyes told them was not true, was morally wrong.

What drove Rod particularly was the conviction that the ‘progressive’ nonsense which so many politicians, bureaucrats and academics upheld was not just a crime against plain-speaking and truth-telling, it was also designed to gull and fleece working people – to pummel them into submission and get them to pay for the administrative cadre’s pet projects. In that sense he was, like Swift, Cobbett and Orwell, on the side of those who lived not by lies but by honest endeavour, on the side of working people against the condescending classes. He was – as all the best satirists are – the genuine progressive, the truer moralist. And, in person, kind, thoughtful and supportive.

I first got to know Rod when I was a tyro reporter at the BBC and he was an executive on the *Today* programme. As others have written, he was a driven and demanding boss but also restlessly intellectually curious, endlessly original and prepared to spend time with young journalists, encouraging and guiding with a father’s care.

The BBC at the time was bureaucratic, conformist, corporate and timid. Rod’s presence was like Jack Sparrow at Henley Regatta. You couldn’t help but love him.

He was a far better journalist than most of us at the BBC at the time but the BBC was never his spiritual home. Nor indeed was the *Guardian*, for which he went on to write. Which is why I was delighted, when I was an executive at the *Times*, to give him a column on that paper. That is when his voice came into its own. And then he also found in *The Spectator* a home for his freest, most authentic, most daring writing.

There are comparisons to be drawn with other *Spectator* writers of the past – scabrous satirists like Auberon Waugh, free-booting iconoclasts such as Christopher Hitchens, upenders of cosy fictions like Theodore Dalrymple – but Rod was unique. His economic views were those of a Peter Shore or Barbara Castle – labourist and protectionist. His attachment to free expression was purely, classically, liberal. His attachment to institutions – from Millwall Football Club to the Church of England – romantically Tory. But running through everything was his burning, restless, unquenchable desire to be the first, clearest and loudest enemy of the lies by which we were being asked to live.

I know you will miss him. Terribly. So will I. More than words allow me to say.

Boris Johnson

There is a reason the death of Rod Liddle has provoked such a swirling tide of grief among his millions of followers, including readers of this magazine, and that is that in the last 25 years Rod came to occupy a crucial position in journalism, and indeed in our country as a whole.

His columns became a haven, a refuge, in which he gave us permission to think things that are in fact common sense, but which have for some reason become taboo. He gave us a renewed permission to laugh – at him, at ourselves, at our collective absurdities – at a time when laughter is increasingly controlled and often suppressed.

Look at what has happened to free speech in the last couple of decades: J.K. Rowling all but cancelled just for saying a woman is a

It was fruity stuff to say Africa was run by gangsters, megalomaniacs, Marxists and murderous warlords

woman; the cops knocking on your door for non-crime hate incidents; students banning brilliant minds from their campuses; endless ridiculous 'content warnings'; people fired just for a stray comment on the internet.

It's mad, and yet more and more journalists have been invisibly capitulating. We have been toning it down, cutting that joke, sandpapering things to avoid getting into trouble.

Not Rod Liddle. In the last few years he seemed to become more and more exceptional: still blazing away from his lonely but glorious redoubt.

He had a genius, week after week, for finding the point that was obviously true but notionally unsayable, and then saying it with such zing as to cause maximum offence – and to all the right people.

It was his writing ability that really drove his enemies nuts. He was just more readable than anyone else, with a deceptively easy conversational style that moved you down the page, in a flowing argument where he always found time to let you know what he was reading or smoking or drinking (generally chilled Sancerre).

I knew I had found an ally and friend when, in 2002, Unicef decided for some reason that he and I would be ideal candidates to see the good work they were doing in Uganda, where the life expectancy was then 46, and where 56 per cent of spending came from aid agencies.

I am afraid we both came back and wrote fairly blistering pieces, in which we agreed that western aid was not the solution. As Rod said in the *Guardian*: 'If Africa is hopeless, it is because it has been ruled for the past 60 or more years by a fantastic collection

'He's upset all the wrong people.'

of conspicuously vile dictators; gangsters, incompetents, corrupt self-serving megalomaniacs, cretinous Marxist ideologues, halfwits, imbeciles, murderous tribal warlords and, plainly, the barking mad and the criminally insane. Some of them are still there, doing their whacko, hapless stuff, in Harare, Mogadishu etc.'

I mean, it's fruitily put, but can you disagree with a word? A short time later he left the *Today* programme, and he was one of my very proudest signings for *The Spectator*. There was a long golden period (or so I remember it) when he and Peter Oborne used to take turns to open the batting, tonking it over the gasometer with every ball.

Rod's innings has now closed far, far too early. I grieve for him, and for Alicia, and the children, and for all of us who read and loved him. The country really needs him now.

We don't need to spend billions policing micro-aggressions and trying to cure 'anxiety'. What we need is the mental robustness that goes with a sense of humour. God bless him, Rod understood that.

Let's hope aspiring columnists learn his lesson: to be both funny and truthful, you also have to be brave.

Boris Johnson was editor of The Spectator *between 1999 to 2005.*

Fraser Nelson

It was in Westminster Magistrates' Court, where I was sitting waiting for the judge's verdict, that I decided I needed a better way

The Rodyssey.

of handling Rod Liddle's column. As editor of this magazine, I had inherited one of the greatest writers; a force of nature loved by his readers for his bravery and candour. But it sometimes led to difficulties: in this case, criminal prosecution. The judge had a choice: prosecute our owners, the editor, or the magazine. The magazine was fined.

'Rod was right,' I was told by Aidan Barclay, who as proprietor had nearly ended up in the dock himself. 'But truth is no defence. Not any more. You need to spot these things before they blow up.'

Rod had pointed out the flaw in the retrial of Stephen Lawrence's killers: could a jury really be unbiased given how everyone had been told that the accused were guilty? A fair point, but a court order had been issued banning people from making it. Our main lawyer was away, and his substitute had approved Rod's article. I was away too. We needed better systems. The Rod unit was born.

Its mission: to protect the magazine's single greatest asset in a new era of cancel culture. Not by issuing diktats or 'guidance', but by spotting sentences that could be maliciously misconstrued. Lawyers advised the magazine on legal risk, but no one advised on digital blow-ups that were increasingly claiming scalps all over the place. It was seldom the core of an argument that provoked; always the joke, the rhetorical flourish. The

I once asked him if there was a substitute we could use instead of the f-word. He suggested the c-word

writer Kevin Myers would lose his job at the *Sunday Times*; the great Kelvin MacKenzie would leave the *Sun*; Ian Buruma would even be fired as editor of the *New York Review of Books*.

They did not anticipate the battles of the new era. At *The Spectator*, we tried to. The Rod unit's job was not to avoid the fights, but to prepare for them – and ensure we could win. So, a magazine with barely 20 editorial staff soon had three devoted to assessing risk. They would protect, not censor, flagging any risks to the editor, so I'd be happy fighting the battle once it began. Look, they'd say: Douglas Murray is taking a swipe at a rabble-rouser in Leicester called Mohammed Hijab. He may sue. But look, we found an audio recording of Hijab at a rally: he is bang to rights. The point was to shield the writer, while preserving their creativity.

For Rod, it was always the jokes that caused the most trouble. In the digital world, they could easily be misinterpreted. And the threat was not libel courts but Ipso, the press regulator.

To know Rod was to know the most softhearted, least racist person you could imagine, which is perhaps why he didn't shy away from making important points. He cared, deeply, about flourish. He disliked his

work being sanitised. I once asked if there was a substitute for the f-word; he suggested the c-word. I tried to negotiate him down to 'moron'; he put up a fight. He knew that these jokes were the essence of his work. Long debates would follow about 'moron' vs 'retard'. Such were Tuesday nights at *The Spectator*.

Our lawyers were kept busy, too. 'Happy to keep the dildo reference,' ran one email from our lawyer, 'but I would drop the paedophile reference as it's a bit of a stretch.' Or another: 'Might be best to take out "ketamine-fuelled" party and replace with something like "wild"'. (Ketamine suggested illegality: Rod was joking, but sometimes it was best to take the lawyers' advice.)

'What evidence does Rod have that he's still a man and "still has frank 'n' beans"?' (A standard of proof is needed to assess that someone is pre-op.) 'The reference to Justin Trudeau as a sex pest should be removed – unless there is some evidence to prove it.'

When *The Spectator* was being sold, I had to explain to prospective buyers why our Rod unit existed. I made the case for why so much time and resource was used to protect rude jokes. At the time, we were midway through our battle with Hijab's lawyers and could have lost hundreds of thousands of pounds. Why run such risks? Why not just avoid taking swipes at litigious street-agitators, or cut sentences that might be considered too risky or offensive? Cheaper, surely?

Our lawyers were kept busy, too. 'Happy to keep the dildo reference,' ran one email

How easy it now is for a word to be taken out of context, and for a writer to be smeared as a racist or a bigot. Why even tiptoe towards this line of fire?

Because this was a battle not just for the soul of the magazine but for the British tradition of publishing satire, of which *The Spectator* can proudly claim to be the world's longest-running example. The 1711 *Spectator* features a rant by a parrot about the debauchery of its owner. Go to *The Spectator* archives and you see the Rod Liddles of their time: one saying the children of the Tolpuddle Martyrs should also be deported because their placard placed an apostrophe in Martyrs. The tradition of satirising moral fervour, of people poking fun at each other, is worth fighting for. If we lose the ability to laugh at ourselves, we lose something fundamental to our culture.

No one made readers laugh more than Rod. No one was funnier, more outrageous or on-point. The Rod unit – or red team, as I also called it – would usually find that the extraordinary things Rod wrote about were exactly as he said. He actually had done the research. His depth of learning and understanding provided the real power of his articles. The ribaldry, the risqué language, the rollercoaster: this was the journey, but always to a destination. It was also what separated him from his imitators. He knew the difference between wit and profanity.

What a great column he'd have written this week. How much fun he'd have had skewering those now hailing him as a national treasure – even though they always kept quiet (or joined the pile-on) when he was under fire.

Without him, who will write these kind of articles? There will never be anyone like Rod, but how lucky we all were to live in a world illuminated by him. He helped us to see, to think and – most of all – to laugh.

Fraser Nelson was editor of The Spectator *between 2009 and 2024.*

Sophie Winkleman

I met Rod 22 years ago this month. We had been selected as team-mates on a gameshow pilot, and, halfway through the morning's filming, we went for a fag break. He said to me: 'This is crap, shall we go to the pub?' We scarpered and spent the rest of the day in a Covent Garden pub, working our way through the drinks list and chatting away like chipmunks.

I'd never been starstruck by anyone before I met Rod. However famous or talented actors are, their job is to say stuff written by other people. Rod, however, was a legend to me. I began reading his *Guardian* columns at university. Though I was studying all the greats of English literature, it was Rod's writing which felt like a ribbon-wrapped gift, a treat, a joy.

His capacity to address dark, complex subjects with the lightness of a chef sprinkling icing sugar was dizzying. He was so profoundly funny, made each of his sketches look so easy, but beneath the deliberately pugnacious language a serious artist was at work.

I think I loved his language of insults the most: luckily, he issued forth a stream of them like a Middlesbrough Shakespeare.

I soon learned after meeting him that, beneath the merciless rapier-blade of his writing, nestled the sweetest man. A generous, sensitive, godly, honourable sweetheart. He viewed the world through a loving

He would tell me that all the best people treat their bodies like bins (and all the worst like temples)

and poetic lens, saving his acid for pomposity, falseness, injustice and hypocrisy.

He was also endearingly, maddeningly modest. I don't think he had any clue how brilliant he was. I trusted him instinctively with everything, as I'm sure all his friends did, and he repaid me with thoughtful, funny, scrupulously honest kindness.

I think all his female friends would attest to how unusually wonderful and natural he was with women. He was complimentary in a heart-toasting, unpredatory way – 'You're a corker, Winkle-person' – and pleasantly reassuring if I told him I was getting fat. 'Don't be such a mong,' was always his response.

I worried about how much he drank and smoked – but then he'd tell me that all the best people treat their bodies like bins (and all the worst like temples) and to curtain-twitch elsewhere.

He was totally unjudgmental and always interested in everything, polymath that he was. When I mentioned becoming involved with the *Big Issue*, we chatted for a long time about how many homeless people had violent childhoods. He was passionately on the side of wronged people, wronged animals, wronged communities – a fighter for the forgotten, traduced and misrepresented like no other. Naturally he was also a gloriously lethal slayer of the jumped-up.

When he called to tell me he had cancer – 'in my brain and lungs, so not too bad' – he just wanted to talk about how wonderful all the nurses were. On the night before he died, his best friend Jez told me he was making all the nurses laugh.

A mighty oak has fallen. An oak in a black leather jacket, with a sweet, lugubrious expression and an accent that had curiously settled somewhere near the Midlands.

I will miss Rod painfully, as a friend both to me and to this troubled country which he loved so much.

'Hello! We all died laughing at your writing!'

Kemi Badenoch

One of the joys of being director of digital at *The Spectator*, back in 2015, was seeing the magazine proofs before they went to print. Rod Liddle's column was the first thing I looked for, always the one I was most eager to read. He made me laugh every single time, something very few columnists are able to do. I was annoyed I liked those columns,

because I didn't want to like Rod Liddle. All I knew of his personal life was through the scandal that followed him leaving his wife during the so-called 'Sextator' years. I took a dim view of that.

Although we both worked for *The Spectator*, I didn't actually meet Rod for a long time because, woke snowflake that he was, he only ever worked from home.

The first time we met was at a *Spectator* summer party, years later. Despite the very spiky conversation, we got on like a house on fire. It started off with an argument. I told him I was a Conservative. He sniffed at me in disgust and told me he was a member of the SDP.

Somewhere during the conversation, he looked me up and down and said: 'I suppose you think I'm some racist old bigot, don't you?' I laughed, we drank, others joined in.

We shared an irreverent sense of humour. That sense of humour has got me into trou-

We got on like a house on fire – even if he did sniff at me in disgust when I told him I was a Conservative

ble for many years, right from my school days and long before politics – perhaps even now. So I understood Rod Liddle and he understood me.

I also enjoy poking fun at the po-faced moralisers who want to lecture everybody while leading hypocritical lives themselves.

Rod was outrageous, dark, rude and extremely funny. He was deliberately provocative, but beneath the provocation there was always a serious argument, usually one that more respectable writers had recognised, and even agreed with, but were too frightened to make. He made original points and made them impossible to ignore.

I can understand why he did not get on at the BBC. Rod remained the same, while the BBC changed, becoming more cautious and less comfortable with his kind of irreverence.

Rod understood that the mob was a danger, not something to kowtow to. We both shared an aversion to cancel culture, organised and performative outrage. He knew that the moment a writer begins tailoring his thoughts to please online critics, the critics have won.

I know the moment a politician starts announcing policy simply to be liked, or because it's what the polls say, they've lost the argument. We have to do what we believe in, follow our principles, do what we know is right, and not just what the polls demand. That is why I will sometimes take positions with which people disagree, but at least they know where I stand.

Rod's response to the online mob is one which, even in death, we must remember. The usual ghouls, the types who celebrated the deaths of Margaret Thatcher and Ann Widdecombe, have come out again to tell us what a terrible person Rod was. And, of course, he was a deeply flawed man. But he mattered. He mattered because he made people think, laugh, get angry and argue. The minnows attacking him after his death merely demonstrate his significance. They must be ignored as we focus on the passing of one of the greats.

While Rod and I found common ground on common sense, culture and the absurdities of modern public life, we did, however, fundamentally disagree on economics. I am a Thatcherite. He could not abide Thatcherism. We both agreed that Britain was getting poorer due to foolishness, losing great industry, our heritage and our strength.

Our prescriptions for how to deal with that were, of course, different. The truth is Rod cared less about whether an argument was left-wing or right-wing. He was more interested in whether it was true or false, clever or stupid.

When I heard about his passing, I went back to the *Spectator* website I once used to run to read the last article he'd written. I was overwhelmed by emotion as I discovered it was the one about me.

Back in June, I thanked him for writing such a flattering article. He replied: 'It was a fine piece of almost Gonzo political journalism. Hunter S. Thompson lives!'

When Rod Liddle gave you a compliment, you took it, no questions asked. His compliments were rare indeed.

Rod praised wit, intellectual seriousness and a willingness to offend one's own side. 'Kemi gives me hope' was the headline of the article. I think what gave him hope was the return of argument, personality and giving it a bit of welly. His article was ultimately a defence of intelligence in public life and a protest against its slow suffocation.

I now have a duty to make sure that hope is justified and indeed honoured. *The Spectator* also has a duty too. A lot of people are going to miss his words from these pages. His family will miss him even more and my heart goes out to them. Rod died of the same disease that took my father, slowly and then all at once. I know the pain they are feeling.

His absence will be felt greatly. Much more than a missing column, Rod's passing leaves an empty space in the lives of all of us who need that common sense and that fearlessness of those who aren't afraid to say what they think.

The Spectator now has a huge job to do. Someone has to find a way of filling the space his death has left in these pages. That would be the greatest tribute we can give to Rod Liddle, provocateur and writer extraordinaire.

Rest in peace, my friend. I will miss you.

London: A celebration

Albanian gangsters with rice flails and Uzis,
Ukrainian pimps with high-cheekboned floozies,
Jamaicans with handguns, Somalis with knives
– just some of the people enriching our lives.
Jew-hating Imams from Rabat and Homs,
Stockpiling their basements with ricin and bombs,
Rich Saudi princes with cowering slaves,
Slovakian hooligans, Romanian knaves,
A fat lady from Lagos looking quite glum
With five kilos of gak stashed away up her bum,
Levantine maniacs beating up gays,
Young girls from Thailand whose skills quite amaze,
Grim Kurdish separatists from the shores of Lake Van,
Strange Russian men with a nuclear tan,
From Romford to Ruislip a myriad show
Of cultural diversity – so mind how you go.

– Rod Liddle (2012)

Good riddance, Rod

I, for one, won't miss him

TITANIA McGRATH

When a famous right-wing, straight white male dies, if your first instinct isn't to gloat and trash his reputation then you clearly have no idea what it takes to be a progressive.

The death of Rod Liddle is currently being celebrated by all of us on the right side of history. And because we announce our pronouns and wear keffiyehs, we can refer to him as a scumbag who deserves to burn in Hell and everyone will know that we're actually incredibly compassionate.

It's a matter of simple mathematics. The population is divided into two factions: those who are good and those who are evil. Every time an evil person dies, the proportion of good people increases. Ergo, by dying, Liddle has made the world a gooder place.

Being kind is largely about efficiency. Since I heard about Liddle's passing, I have been busily digging through his past articles and books in order to identify the quotations that will do the most damage to his legacy. Kindness is hard work.

Anyone in any doubt that he was a demon in human form should consult his archive of writing, most of which is available on the website of an extreme far-right magazine called *The Spectator* (an anagram of 'protects hate', which should give you some sense of its editorial strategy).

Need evidence of Liddle's hatred? He once described the Welsh as 'miserable, seaweed-munching, sheep-bothering pinch-faced hill tribes'. This kind of racism against people living in the Third World is utterly unforgivable.

Liddle also wrote that he had a policy of referring to trans women as 'he' and 'him', which makes him worse than Hitler. I mean, the Nazis may have done a few bad things, but at least they never misgendered Eddie Izzard.

Perhaps the most heinous thing he ever wrote was in September 2012, when he made the following admission: 'The one thing stopping me from being a teacher was that I could not remotely conceive of not trying to shag the kids.' A less sophisticated reader would assume that this was merely a dark and provocative joke, but as a left-wing activist I know better. Besides, jokes are a form of stochastic terrorism.

Liddle's trick was to conceal his evil thoughts behind 'satire', an abusive strategy that bigots use to disguise their true feelings. It makes complete sense if you stop to think about it. Quite obviously, the best way for Liddle to conceal the fact that he wanted to shag kids was to write an article saying he wanted to shag kids.

He was also guilty of repeatedly inciting violence. In July last year, he wrote that he literally wanted to bomb the Glastonbury festival as a means to eliminate 'street drummers, liberal politicians, provo vegans, radical rappers, spiritual healers, Billy Bragg, that bloke who owns Forest Green Rovers, druggies, tattooed blue-haired hags, almost the entirety of middle-class London'.

It is beyond belief that he was able to get away with this call for wholesale slaughter. He even specified the device he planned to use: 'a small yield nuclear weapon'. When I called the police and asked them to search his property for it, the officer actually laughed, as though there were something ridiculous about mass murderers outlining their plans in advance in the national press.

As George Monbiot pointed out in the *Guardian*, these were not 'jokes' but 'thought experiments', and Liddle was verifiably and indisputably 'floating the possibility of killing hundreds of thousands of people'. Monbiot is clearly an intellectual colossus whose powers of analysis verge on the preternatural.

Shamefully, Liddle later decried Monbiot's 'intense and consuming stupidity' and said that his prose was 'devoid of both doubt and humour'. But an unquestioning self-certainty is precisely what is required to be an effective campaigner for social justice. This is why I could never comprehend Liddle's enthusiasm to participate in public debates. Imagine being so insecure in your belief system that you would be willing to hear different opinions?

Liddle's underhand behaviour was reminiscent of that dead white male, Jonathan Swift. He famously incited people to eat babies and then used the predictable 'satire' defence to wriggle out of it. (Admittedly, a controlled programme of infanticide would certainly reduce humanity's environmental footprint, but as a vegan I find the notion of child cannibalism to be deeply problematic.)

So good riddance, Rod Liddle. You join the pantheon of history's villains along with Pol Pot, Benito Mussolini, Ivan the Terrible and Hulk Hogan. And although you will never again write your diatribes, we'll not let the world forget your unique evil.

BAROMETER

Diverse academia

Jason Arday was heralded as Cambridge's youngest-ever black professor when appointed professor of sociology of education in 2023. How many ethnic-minority staff are there at UK universities?
– In 2024/25 there were **244,755** academic staff working in British universities. Of these, **26%** were recorded as being of ethnic minority. In the same year, **16%** of the UK population identified as ethnic minority.
– Of **23,900** professors, **14%** were ethnic minority.
– Between 2023/24 and 2024/25 the number of professors of ethnic minority increased by **4%**, while the number of professors who are white rose by **1%**.
– While HESA statistics subdivide ethnic minorities into 'black' and other groups, they are only listed in bands to the closest five. This gives a total of **270** black professors, although the real total could be higher or lower than this.
Source: Higher Education Statistics Agency

Water, water, everywhere

How much water is lost to leakage?
In 2024/25 some 19% of water leaked before reaching the consumer. The worst companies for leakage were:

Thames Water	**22.5%**
United Utilities	**22.2%**
Wessex Water	**20.7%**
Yorkshire Water	**20.4%**

And the best were...

Bristol Water	**13.4%**
Cambridge Water	**12.7%**
SES Water	**12.7%**
Essex & Suffolk Water	**11.8%**

Source: Environment Agency

Ceuta survey

Who lives in Ceuta?
– In 2025, the population of the Spanish enclave was **83,567**, of whom **94%** were Spanish citizens and **68%** were born in Ceuta itself.
– Approximately **60%** spoke Spanish as their first language and **40%** Arabic.
– **51%** were Christian and **48%** Muslim.
– In 2024, **2,881** migrated there and **2,664** emigrated, giving net migration of **217**.

Gas meter

How expensive is petrol in Britain?
– In June UK motorists paid an average of 155.6 pence per litre. The most expensive petrol in Europe was (in pence):

Denmark	**206.7**
Netherlands	**193.2**
Finland	**191.3**

The cheapest countries were...

Malta	**115.8**
Poland	**121.6**

ROD LIDDLE

Can I fucking swear yet?

The following column was written in 2024 for former Spectator *editor Fraser Nelson when he left the magazine. This is the first time it has been published.*

My favourite ever email came from a friend and fellow hack, Roland White. It said: 'You bastard. I had a 50 quid bet that Charles Moore would be the first *Spectator* writer to use the word "clunge" in an article.' Ha. I admit I had been surprised to see the word there, in hard copy, when the mag was published. I had expected the usual haggling. 'Can't you say vagina, Rod? Or just leave it out altogether? Or how about Lady Garden?' And in childish petulance, almost howling, I would aver no, it absolutely must be clunge, only clunge will do, because it speaks of a rogue and earthy demotic, which in a very real sense is the antithesis of what I am elsewhere suggesting and is therefore funny. So it must be clunge – or at the very least, minge, or if even that offends, splattered clam.

But it never happened. There was no kickback. The silence on that Tuesday night was unendurable. Why isn't Fraser ringing me about the fucking clunge business and explaining why he has decided that the word was not befitting of a publication which had such an exalted pedigree, all the way back to those fucking liberal leftie Regency chancers, and which was now owned by people – refined, decent and very well-off people – who did not have much truck with clunges and the like? But there was no argument rolling down the line.

I checked my phone to see if I had missed the call. Nope. And as a consequence the editor within me began to nag. 'Ring them up and tell them to replace clunge,' this voice said, 'because it's not becoming. It's just cheap. You often cheapen yourself in such a way because at heart you're 12 years old and possessed only of an aspiration to shock.' The editor within, you see, is always crueller and more censorious than the actual editor.

But I didn't ring the mag. Probably got pissed and fell asleep watching *Family Fortunes* on Yesterday. But I did wonder why that call from Fraser had never come. Perhaps he was dealing with something more pressing than an infantile columnist – that thought occurred. Perhaps he is just sick to death of you and your obsessions. Or is having trouble with a Taki column, or Douglas has maybe told the truth a little too resonantly again, or Lionel has said something a bit gamey or or or or...

There were so many of those ors. So many fires to put out, every week. And then fires which after consideration he decided should

It must be clunge – or at the very least, minge, or if even that offends, splattered clam

let blaze for a bit. Nobody has trodden that incredibly thin line with greater legerity and acuity than Fraser Nelson.

He was extraordinarily prescient about the trouble coming down the line from the massed hordes of hate-not-hopers on the left who wanted the magazine closed down because it possessed, in general, a point of view with which they disagreed. Intellectual pygmies like Owen Jones, tapping feverishly on their little Twitter accounts, splaffing their fury and self-righteousness over their keyboards, determined to close mouths.

What actually happened of course these last 15 years was that the circulation of *The Spectator* increased almost exponentially, because Fraser allowed the important stuff to get through and just stopped enough to prevent us from becoming an easy target for those whose only concern is to silence voices which dare to dissent from an increasingly censorious left-wing hegemony. His success as an editor will become, in time, legendary and is even now scarcely believable. In an age when the attention span of the world was reducing almost exponentially and the appetite for newsprint was drying up, *The Spectator* soared. Thanks to a singular journalistic vision which was at once both liberal, in the best sense of the term, and conservative in its these days rarely seen unspastic manifestation.

Fraser – we are all hacks and we all shuffle off to Buffalo, sooner or later. One way or another. But you are an exceptional journalist and I will miss you terribly, as a friend and also as your perpetually splenetic and furious and undoubtedly annoying, arrogant, employee. The one who argued with you, sometimes in a rage, on a Tuesday evening, when you decided that it was perhaps an inopportune time to have a go at the trannies and wondered if I might contribute something to the magazine which was perhaps less fantastically bigoted.

I have to say that in all our many arguments over the years, you were almost always right. Only almost always, mind. You were wrong that time regarding the piece I wrote about poofs. I was SO fucking right about that one. Just SO bang on the money. Might dig it up and see how Gove likes it. Think he'd be OK. But you can't tell, can you?

SPECTATOR.COM/RODLIDDLE
Read all of Rod's columns from 2002 onwards on our website and archive.

Party animal

Rod Liddle, the SDP supporter

WILLIAM CLOUSTON

In 2019 I had to explain to Iain Dale – live on LBC – that Rod Liddle's suggestion in his *Spectator* column that elections should be held on Islamic holy days to deter Muslims from voting was not a serious proposal. Neither was his idea that students be drugged by their parents to the same end. It was humour, and they were jokes.

When he was in hospital a few weeks ago, I visited Rod with some cake. While he munched away, he expressed a sense of regret that he could have been a great writer. Rod always thought his true calling was writing fiction, rather than journalism, and always wondered if he'd sold his soul by following the money.

He was right – he did have the makings of a British Houellebecq. But while we only need to re-read *Too Beautiful For You*, his short-story compilation from 2003, to see his potential for quirky black material, I felt it was unfair of Rod to downgrade his journalism. The cult following for his columns and articles showed that his writing had diamond-quality – and, like a diamond, it was cutting. Hilarious, irreverent and taking no prisoners, he said what needed to be said. See one of his best pieces of this decade on taking in a Ukrainian. 'Do you have any photographs?' Rod asked.

I was fortunate enough to become a friend of Rod's when he joined the Social Democratic party (SDP) in 2018. I was flattered that he believed in me and the party and he devoted much of the subsequent eight years speaking, writing and promoting it. He delivered no fewer than eight speeches to SDP conferences, the first one at Peterborough in 2019. This speech contained brilliant flashes of insight into the political economy but was also punctuated with expletives and a bizarre account of his expulsion from the Labour party. After viewing the footage the following week and deciding it was probably too outrageous to publish, I phoned Rod to check if he understood my reasoning. 'It's no problem, Will. Put it out!' he said. 'What? Even the bit about the rubber doll?' I replied.

Our attempts to raise serious funding for the party always foundered on the SDP's wishes for a state strong and competent enough to run trains, build houses and supply water and cheap electricity to its citizens. Time and time again Rod and I – and our dear colleague Patrick O'Flynn – found that these matters were not a prime concern of the very wealthy. But there were some highlights. We once assembled at a potential funder's house overlooking Regent's Park and Rod took a shine to some of the art on his walls. 'Just give us the Rubens,' he suggested, to no avail. One year previously I took an important and generous donor to public causes to my house in Orkney with the same aim. Rod telephoned after we got no results: 'What does he want – a blowjob?'

When I pointed out a policy he had trumpeted wasn't in the manifesto, he'd bark back: 'Yes, but it should be'

Rod would also make up party policy on the hoof. When I pointed out that a policy he had just trumpeted wasn't in the SDP manifesto, he'd bark back: 'Yes, but it should be.' His advocacy for the SDP cause remained. When interviewing him for the *Telegraph* during the 2024 general election, Liam Halligan mentioned that other candidates were available. Rod replied, 'Yes, but they're all morons.'

When Rod moved north to Weardale in 2021, close to my home in Northumberland, our friendship deepened. We spent Sunday evenings competing in the local pub quiz where Rod's encyclopaedic knowledge was confirmed. He had very few blind spots, and would lap up 80 per cent of the questions himself. He'd then rely on his wife, Alicia, and me to get over the line and take the prize money. The fourth member of our 'Gang of Four' was Rod's labrador who, by constantly emitting the foulest fumes, could drive competing teams from the pub. On the few occasions we were not successful Rod would positively fume: 'Only c**ts lose.'

There were private aspects of Rod's life which did not conform to his public persona, such as his profound Christianity. He inherited the low Protestantism of his mother along with her suspicion of Roman Catholics. And his views on homosexuality were closer to the book of Leviticus than modern sentiment. His advocacy of animal welfare was implacable. Of course, there were other opinions which were less well founded – such as his inexplicable loathing of Led Zeppelin and Queens Park Rangers.

Rod understood friendship and forgiving, and I will miss our long discussions on the political philosophy of John Gray – and of music. No longer can we debate for hours whether Nils Lofgren's 'Moon Tears' is superior to 'You're the Weight'.

My wife once observed that beneath Rod's brusque exterior, all Millwall and kicking against the pricks, lay a deeply sentimental, gentle and sensitive soul. This was true. Farewell, Rod. Our loss is heaven's gain.

JOHN BROADLEY

DOUGLAS MURRAY

Farewell, my brave and brilliant friend

How do you produce the type of person who cares deeply while seemingly not giving a damn? With great difficulty, it turns out. Plenty of people imagine that they can say what they think, but very few do. For most people, some real or imaginary social punishment lies on the horizon: a dinner they won't be invited to; a club of which they fear they will never become a member.

Rod Liddle was one of the happy few who was free. He was free to say what he thought. He was free to voice unpopular opinions and – often harder – he was free to voice popular opinions. When the whole world seemed to be falling on his head he had a perfectly contented attitude towards it. I remember a few years back when there was a Rod storm (always caused by people who don't read *The Spectator* taking some line – usually a joke – out of context), I asked him how he was doing. If I remember rightly the evening news had actually done a segment in which an interviewer had read out portions of Rod's latest column to people on the street, gauging their reactions. These were almost universally bewildered or appalled, because that is what the broadcaster wanted them to be.

Anyway, Rod was fine, of course. Though he did tell me that his latest way of realising he had set off the banshees was that he would be happily sitting in his study and his wonderful wife, Alicia, would arrive in the doorway and give him a look that made it clear that whatever he had just written had become the main news story of the day.

It takes a considerable amount of composure, confidence and certainty in your cause to be unbothered by such hurricanes. But Rod was indeed unbothered by them. On occasion he seemed to enjoy them, as though the howling was a sort of refreshing breeze, reminding him of the insanities of his critics and reassuring himself that he was right.

The role of such a figure in a culture can hardly be overstated. In a society in which everyone is meant to say the same thing, the person who refuses to do so is at a premium. If that person is also driven not by a desire to shock, but by a desire to tell the truth, then they are even more valuable.

That was what drove Rod. Of course he enjoyed the occasional bomb that would shake his editor, copy-editor, lawyer or reader. He even developed a trick which he passed on, which was to plant some obvious firework into a column which would have to be removed, but leave a depth-charge in the hope that nobody noticed before it went off. It was a brilliant tactic.

Better still was the fact that his bomb-throwing was grounded in deep moral causes. He loved this country. He loved its people. He loved the working class who had become such an enemy of the sort of people who normally have columns in national newspapers. He loved Millwall. He loved his family. He loved his wider family of readers and colleagues.

In a society in which everyone is meant to say the same thing, the person who refuses to do so is at a premium

When we last spoke he was in hospital but it looked like things were getting better. I was optimistic for his return, as was he. But he also had what he described to me as a zen-like attitude towards the possibility that everything was coming to an end for him. He told me that he had a slight attitude of 'my work here is done'. We laughed at the idea of him as a do-gooder, but that is in fact partly what he was. He gave people the confidence to be more honest, ask more questions and put up with less cant.

I hope he knew how appreciated he was. A few years ago, *The Spectator* packed out the London Palladium for an 'in conversation with Rod Liddle'. I was there and it was magnificent to see one of the capital's largest theatres filled with readers wanting to see Rod. I popped backstage afterwards and there he was on his own, changing T-shirts and sizing up a bottle of wine he'd been given as a fee. 'How was it, mate?' he asked as I put my head round the door. 'I have one thing to say,' I told him. 'I don't think Yasmin Alibhai-Brown could have filled this place.'

Afterwards at the pub I asked a few young readers what had brought them out. I remember one of them saying to me: 'I want to be around people who are saying things I'd like to say some day.' It was deeply moving, because this instinct was right. Being around someone brave like Rod – or even reading him – had the effect of making other people braver too.

Very few writers have that effect. Christopher Hitchens did. Auberon Waugh perhaps. Like them, Rod had that caring yet devil-may-care attitude. Even as a colleague he freed up others. He and I used to joke when we got together that at least we always had Taki there to give cover. Later I used to joke to Rod that at least he was still there to take any flak that might be incoming.

It's one of the more minor reasons to miss Rod, but I shall miss him more than I can say. The world just became a bit blander, significantly less amusing and palpably less honest. Somewhat morosely I remember the night he and I were tasked with removing Jeremy Clarke from a *Spectator* writers' party. Jeremy was happily dancing on his own in front of a hedge when I arrived. There was no music.

'Wotcha Douglas.' 'Wotcha Jeremy,' I said. 'You seem pretty happy.' 'I've done drugs,' he replied. Shortly afterwards our Low Life columnist deposited the contents of his stomach on to *The Spectator*'s garden steps and fell into a bush.

I can't remember why Rod and I ended up taking charge, but Rod did it far better than me. 'Why should Jeremy be my responsibility?' he said to me at one point, exasperated. And yet Rod assumed that responsibility nonetheless. I rarely loved him more than in that moment: harried, amused, exasperated and hoping nobody would notice how much he cared.

The fabulist

Why is Cambridge University so eager to believe Jason Arday?

LARA BROWN

The story of Jason Arday is so brilliantly illuminating of the rottenness of our Establishment that it seems – literally – fabulous. He seems to be almost too fantastic a figure for conventional fiction; rather, he is a character from fables of old – an archetype exposing the sins and hypocrisy of our times, a modern Till Eulenspiegel or Robin Goodfellow. In Arday's frictionless ascent to academic eminence from a background of apparent disadvantage we see apparently elite institutions eagerly suspending their critical faculties in order to virtue-signal on race, disability and hardship.

By studying Arday's biography we can begin to understand just how in hock to progressive guilt our top universities are – and how damaging this is for real scholarship.

The story Arday has told about his life seems perfectly attuned to appeal to scholars pursuing research in two of the most fashionable areas of current university activity: neurodiversity and institutional racism. Arday purportedly could not speak until he was 11 and could not read until he was 18. Yet he overcame those disabilities and, of course, ubiquitous racial prejudice, to leverage an educational studies and physical education degree from the former teacher training college in Twickenham which calls itself St Mary's University, into a professorial chair at Cambridge by the age of 37.

His stunning academic achievements were accompanied by claims of marathon running successes that would test the greatest ultra runners and charity fundraising that would make Bob Geldof feel inadequate, all achieved in the face of vicious racial persecution which would not have been out of place in 19th-century Alabama.

Each of his claims – the 30 marathons, the millions raised for good causes, the violent persecution – has been comprehensively debunked. But still he pushes back against his critics. His defence seems to be that in academia, no one looks that closely. 'Could I have ever guessed that somebody would literally comb through every single word I've ever said?' he asked the *Times*. When a *Guardian* journalist tried to verify his claims – that he'd been threatened by knife-wielding lunatics, had bananas, bullets and a severed pig's head sent to his home address – and found no evidence, he told the journalist: 'I thought you'd just believe me.'

That's because Arday's entire career has been an exercise in being believed, even though the whole point of academia is to question, test and criticise. Arday's ascent is a stunning indictment not just of the incuriosity of Cambridge but its corruption. It seems that no one has ever checked his academic CV, the papers he's put out for publication (and their corrections) or the data he has used. Sociology rewards what it calls 'reflexive accounts'. Put simply, this is the act of evaluating one's own experiences or biases. In other words, just believing someone about the world, without any further investigation.

Grifters have been plying their trade since Alexander of Abonoteichus affixed a false human head to a snake and declared it a God.

Arday's ascent is a stunning indictment not just of the incuriosity of Cambridge but its corruption

There have always been Jason Ardays. The question is why this charlatan made his mark in Cambridge. How is it that one of our most respected institutions proved so permeable and undiscerning? Why is a university, that has now been offered incontrovertible evidence that it has been duped standing by him?

Arday was appointed to his professorship following a unanimous vote by the Board of Electors, chaired by Labour's Baroness Sally Morgan. The announcement was made with considerable fanfare. Before Arday even started the job, the BBC made a video about his extraordinary story. In it, Arday quizzed his new boss, Hilary Cremin, on her work to make the education faculty inclusive. She promised that 'we've listened to the voices of our black scholars and our black students', and that Cambridge would be 'facing up to the structural issues that people face'. Most outlandishly, she told Arday: 'We are so lucky to have you. You are the best in the world in terms of the research that you do.'

'Do I have to spell it out? Because I can't.'

It is almost impossible to believe that Cremin really thought this was true. At this point, Arday had just a handful of publications to his name and an exceptionally low citation count. The title of his PhD contained a grammatical error and his papers misspelt basic words like micro-aggression. He had done very little in the way of actual research, preferring to deploy 'a Critical Race Theory (CRT) a [sic] storytelling method, which operates as a counter-narrative in attempting to conceptualise my own professional experiences of negotiating normative Whiteness'.

Even in the world of racial grievance peddling, Arday was mediocre. One academic source told me that education was a 'high publication, low-quality field'. It is not like maths or economics, in which one may write a small number of high-quality papers before securing academic posts. Much of Arday's work was about his own experiences. It is possible to churn out this sort of content at an unusually high rate. A number of staff members junior to Arday at Cambridge's faculty of education have managed to amass much longer lists of publications. I wonder how they felt when Arday was brought in above them and declared 'the best in the world'.

Then there is his academic CV. An undergraduate degree and MA from St Mary's University; a PhD from Liverpool John Moores University, then brief stints at the University of Roehampton and Durham (Arday also claims to have worked at Glasgow but a spokesman denies this). Arday may also have completed an MA in education studies at Liverpool John Moores but this has recently disappeared from his biography on the Jesus College website, where he is a fellow.

Without wishing to descend into snobbery, it would be impressive to secure a PhD at Cambridge from Liverpool John Moores. It is almost unheard of to secure a full chair at Cambridge with those qualifications – I have been unable to find a single other Cambridge professor from Arday's alma mater. It is, frankly, quite unusual for anyone with a doctorate from a post-1992 university to ascend to such lofty heights.

So what bodies of work did Arday rely on to overcome his credentials? When electors sat down to review Arday's application to a professorship, they presumably read

his breakout paper, ‘Understanding mental health: what are the issues for black and ethnic minority students at university?’. Assuming they did so, they would have seen the long list of corrections, added after he ‘inadvertently omitted overlap between the two publications [his and a 2016 paper on perceived access to mental health services among black and minority ethnic (BME) communities by Professor Anjum Memon et al]’.

If the electors were familiar with the field in which they believed Arday was ‘best in the world’, did they not find it odd that the 32 BME university students he allegedly recruited gave quotes that can be found in an almost identical form elsewhere? One undergraduate student quoted by Arday seems to parrot the words of Professor Memon almost word for word. Other quotes are attributed to different people (of different races) across Arday’s work. You might expect this to be the sort of discrepancy a panel which had actually read Arday’s research before appointing him would pick up on. Worse still, this is not just plagiarism. If these quotes aren’t real, then Arday may be guilty of data fraud, a much more severe offence for which, one academic says, people are regularly sacked.

Even in the world of racial grievance peddling, Arday was mediocre

Arday’s lack of interest in good research should come as no surprise. He announced it during his ‘disrupting racism’ training sessions at other universities. One whistleblower has shown me a lecture he gave in which he told attendees that an ‘obsession with data is unhelpful’ when discussing racism, while asserting that ‘white culture is exclusionary’.

Again, one might expect Cambridge to be quite embarrassed by its inability to identify these issues. Apparently not. The university has issued a statement claiming that: ‘Professor Arday has been the victim of a vile campaign to undermine his credibility, which must stop. Allegations of plagiarism regarding his thesis and journal publications have been thoroughly investigated by the relevant institutions and the journals in question. Professor Arday has been cleared by those investigations of any wrongdoing.’

Notably, despite appointing Arday, Cambridge seems to believe that it is not its job to investigate allegations itself and is happy to take as read an investigation by Liverpool John Moores as proof of his innocence. One of the chairs of that investigation, Nels Abbey, has said that everyone makes ‘errors along the way’, that’s ‘just how these things tend to work’. During an interview on Times Radio, Abbey did not address even one of the allegations substantively. You’d think Cambridge might be tempted to do its own review.

Academics are falling over themselves to assert that casual plagiarism is part of normal research. Alan Lester, a Cambridge-educated professor of historical geography at the University of Sussex specialising in colonialism, has had to apologise for suggesting that the extent of Arday’s uncited duplication of other scholars’ work is widespread among peers or ‘appropriate’. It isn’t. Presumably his colleagues advised him that this isn’t the sort of industry secret you want to let on.

Three Cambridge Heads of House signed an open letter defending Arday, instigated by the Good Law Project, a political non-profit founded by Jolyon Maugham. Interestingly, Professor Dame Ijeoma Uchegbu, president of Wolfson College, removed her name and Lord Woolley removed his title as principal of Homerton. Sonita Alleyne, master of Jesus College, has kept her name on the letter despite mounting evidence. No surprise, given her previous work attempting to remove a memorial to the college’s benefactor Tobias Rustat from the chapel.

Cambridge has made it very clear that it does not believe lifting more than 100 passages from another source to be bad academic practice. Several academics have signalled that they do not care about evidence that one of their peers may be manipulating or inventing data. It would seem from the evidence that no one responsible for professorships actually reads the candidate’s work – otherwise we might imagine that some of these issues would have been identified.

These problems are not unique to Cambridge’s Faculty of Education. Analysis by *The Spectator* found that Cambridge has the highest rates of error in results and/or conclusions in withdrawn papers of any British institution tracked by academic watchdog Retraction Watch. The lack of academic scrutiny to which Arday was subjected appears to be rife across the whole institution.

This is the same institution which set up an inquiry into ‘legacies of enslavement’ at Cambridge, found ‘no evidence has been seen that suggests Cambridge institutions directly owned any plantations that exploited enslaved people’ and then committed £1.5 million of seed funding to resolve wrongs they couldn’t prove.

The truth is almost certainly that Cambridge University hired Arday so that he could be sent on an endless, self-flagellating media round in which he berated Cambridge for being systematically racist but then praised it for trying to do better.

Maybe, perversely, we should be quite grateful to Professor Arday. He has exposed that journalists are better peer reviewers than Cambridge academics. He’s drawn attention to the vacuous nature of an entire field of research. He’s also granted us a wonderful sanity test. Moving forward, we can safely assume that anyone who has defended Arday’s academic practice has themselves never produced anything of value in the field. Which provokes the question: why are they still in their jobs? At least Jason Arday is creative. What excuse do they have?

At the Crease

Everything sets up to bat this game out favourably,
after the loss of the toss and all those early wickets,
to dig down and in, suffer the attacks
of life’s fast unplayable, unreadable balls,

the minor as well as the major setbacks.
To not lose your footing, accept the thuds
on the pad as inevitable, the play and miss
and several rattling helmet cracks. Think Robin Smith

duckin’ and divin’ Ian Bishop. It isn’t pleasant
or pretty, tied to a pin, the lonely middle.
So, it’s amazing to be here still,
mid-afternoon, fluidly finding the odd four,

the outfield slicker; realising now you can chase more,
not merely endure, the fielders grown tired,
the slip cordon gone – they’ve shipped a few –
yes, your tally-of-being-here gradually grew.

– Paul Deaton

State of the union

Gen Z has lost faith in marriage

LUCAS CHANCELLOR

After a lovely 25th birthday trip to Vienna, I returned home to face the reality of my quarter-life circumstances. I had been happy with my milestones to date – a degree, a stint of modelling on the European and New York runways, a couple of relationships and some encouraging writing contracts – but was then told by my mother what my grandfather Alexander Chancellor had pulled off by the time he was my age.

Having moved to Italy to work for Reuters news agency, he spoke Italian fluently and had married my grandmother, Susanna Debenham; he had two children, he had bought a house and even had someone iron his shirts from time to time, which Susie was definitely not going to do. By the time he reached 35, he was editing this magazine.

Before the despair sank in, I reminded myself of the difference between Alexander's twenties and my own. When he was my age in 1965, the economy wasn't malnourished, university degrees were paid for by the state and conferred prestige and opportunity, while people sent and received flowers in person rather than on Hinge. Added to which, his generation were provided with a road map for life. All they had to do was follow a set of cut-and-dried social duties and the outcomes would on the whole be pretty agreeable.

One such duty was marriage. Even in the 1960s, when everything was up for grabs, marriage remained an institution conferring stability. My grandparents remained together for 55 years until Alexander's death in 2017 – a bond virtually unheard of among the divorce-prone Gen X. Their secret? They weren't in love – or rather, they weren't romantically in love, not at first anyway.

Susanna had been working as a secretary. Having no real plans for her future, she consulted a respected elder whose advice was to find herself a husband: 'I mean, what on earth else will you do?' Shortly afterwards she happened upon my grandfather. 'He'll do nicely,' she thought to herself. 'He ticks the right boxes.' Their families were linked already, because Alexander's aunt Angela Paget had married Susanna's uncle Sir Piers Debenham, and that turned out all right.

There were no sweeping gestures, no spontaneous trips to Paris and no grand declarations. As plain as it may sound, they simply got on well and maintained a mutual fondness.

I am told that their decision to marry came as a solution to the problem of who would replace an empty milk bottle. A milk bottle might seem a mundane catalyst for marriage, but marriage is built on mundanities. Neither demanded that their partner be a 24/7 shrink, a psycho-spiritual portable battery or a sexual and romantic muse. Neither expected the other to be faithful. They were simply maintaining a tried and tested institution, with the cultivation of tenderness as an added benefit.

My generation grew up watching their (our) parents' marriages fail

Gen X – my mother's generation – has a very different idea of what marriage ought to be. Born during the buzz of 1965-1985, they came of age in a psychedelic and sexual revolution fuelled by the advent of birth control, no-fault divorce laws and rising individualism. Their romantic optimism was reflected in songs like 'Let's Get It On' and 'All You Need is Love', and movies like *Grease* and *Manhattan*.

But this tomfoolery took its toll: marriage rates began to decline sharply, with each subsequent generation following suit in an apparent race to the bottom. The Silent Generation – born, like my grandparents, between 1928 and 1945 – had marriage rates of 81 per cent. Gen X was only 53 per cent, millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) only 44 per cent and Gen Zedders like me (born between 1997 and 2012) are projected to have the lowest marriage rates yet. I'm no statistician, but I suspect these aren't your normal ebbs and flows.

The downstream effect of Gen X's hedonistic approach to romance is that my generation grew up watching their (our) parents' marriages fail. Marriages built on romantic love alone, they discovered, could not last. This resulted in a divorce rate spike and Gen Z's subsequent scepticism about marriage altogether. The problem is that we have been inculcated with the same romantic ideals as our parents: 81 per cent of my generation value marriage, despite having the lowest projected marriage rates on record.

This has led to love being more safely entertained in the mind than in reality – marriage- and relationship-themed reality TV shows like *Love Island*, *The Ultimatum: Marry or Move On* and *Age of Attraction* are more popular among Gen Z than any prior generation. Dating apps have also become a form of entertainment for us: it's all fun and games swiping to discover who finds you attractive until someone ruins the mood by trying to initiate an actual date. A minuscule number of dating app matches lead to a relationship. In fact the only instances of success I've come across have been when both parties already knew each other in person before matching.

All of which is to say that Gen Z's lack of matrimonial success stems from an inner conflict. In losing faith in our parents' model of marriage, we've also begun to lose sight of an older one – marriage as a practical partnership from which love evolves, rather than a romantic ideal on which it entirely depends. And only the former has ever lasted a lifetime.

MADELINE GRANT

Repeating the sins of the past

The Church of England can always be relied upon to walk into a room just as everybody else is leaving. The question of whether we have reached 'peak woke' – the high watermark of Americanised racial politics dictating every aspect of public life – remains open. However, those post-Black Lives Matter efforts, which saw mass demonstrations and acts of self-abasement by companies and institutions, are undeniably more muted and more disputed than they were in 2020. It seems unlikely that, for example, Andy Burnham would 'take the knee', as Keir Starmer did so unthinkingly.

This is partly because institutions have learnt from the mistakes of the past six years, while plenty of those pushing this agenda proved to be grifters, advocates of racial violence, or good old-fashioned charlatans. Not so, however, in the Church of England.

There is something almost endearing about this; the C of E has long been an institution where the eccentricities of the comfortable middle-classes survive long past their sell-by date. Bishops wore wigs deep into the 19th century, and gaiters into the 20th century, after they had become obsolete elsewhere. Inevitably, they will sport rainbow lanyards well into the dog days of the 21st century, after everybody else has thrown them in a bin.

The centrepiece of the C of E's stubborn persistence to a 2020 mindset is Project Spire, its controversial plan to give £100 million in 'reparations' for its role in the transatlantic slave trade. It does this despite the fact this role is historically contested, that previous church bureaucrats have always insisted it is impossible to make single lump-sum grants of this size out of church funds, and perhaps most egregiously of all, despite the fact that many local churches face financial oblivion, which the central C of E regards with indifference.

In fairness, the £100 million figure was negotiated down from the swivel-eyed lunacy of the billion quoted in the Justin Welby era. Spire was something of a personal crusade for Welby, who brought a combination of Etonian hauteur and evangelical zeal in his efforts to basically smear as racist anyone who opposed it. The only other thing he did with equal enthusiasm was closing churches during Covid. There was, then, a glimmer of hope when Sarah Mullally entered Lambeth Palace that this scheme might be put out to pasture.

Fast-forward to last month and images are beamed back from West Africa of the Archbishop perched on an enormous gold throne, next to the King of the Ashanti. Given the C of E's assiduousness in digging deep into how Georgian churchwardens could afford marble monuments in parish churches across the country, you might have thought a quizzical clerical eyebrow or two would have been raised at this, that the thought, 'I wonder how the King of the Ashanti got to sit on a big gold throne' might have entered some minds? Not so.

The Ashanti were among the most enthusiastic participants in chattel slavery; around 10 per cent of the entire Gold Coast slave trade went through, and earned money for, their empire. Rather than condemn this with the same vehemence or use it as a moment of reflection on the universality of the sin of slavery, Mullally instead put out a bizarre video of herself staring across the Atlantic, Caspar David Friedrich-style, accompanied by an apparent re-commitment to Spire.

Were it not for legal challenges, the church would already have paid out £100 million in slave 'reparations'

In doing so, the Archbishop is setting herself up for a fall. Not only is Spire loathed in the pews, church lawyers and bureaucrats privately admit it is immoral and possibly illegal under the laws of the Charity Commission.

There *is* some remaining goodwill towards Mullally, if only for the fact that she is not Welby. However, this will quickly evaporate should she make the pursuit of Spire the defining feature of her archiepiscopacy.

The financial ruin facing many churches is a combination of the post-Covid lag on congregational growth in some places, and high inflation and utility bills, exacerbated by Labour's spiteful decision to end the Listed Places of Worship scheme, which has seen a 20 per cent price increase on almost all repairs. For context, the quote my husband, a vicar, initially received for repairs on our town's church roof went from £50,000 to £60,000 overnight. These burdens are a struggle in Oxfordshire; they are a complete impossibility in Blackpool or Bootle or Redcar.

While no donations to local churches go directly towards slavery reparations, the Project will erode morale, increase suspicion of the centre and upturn the fundamental principle on which church finances have been governed for the last 50 years. Most frustratingly, none of the optics of this has resonated with Spire's most vehement defenders. The only reason its process appears to have slowed lately is due to a series of complex legal challenges relating to charity law. Were it not for the efforts of a small group of eminent legal experts and historians, it might have happened already.

Indeed, alongside Mullally's video are signs that the central church is readying itself for another assault against its people to ram Spire through. Inevitably, however, its means of doing so are outdated and cack-handed. The official website recently uploaded an 'FAQ' page which pretty unsatisfactorily dismisses almost every concern out of hand.

Bishops are fond of pointing opponents to the work of colonial historian Professor Alan Lester, perhaps without realising that his belligerence towards junior scholars and his increasingly quixotic defence of the fraudster Jason Arday, mean that his academic reputation is fast diminishing.

Project Spire is becoming the C of E's very own Chagos deal – a baffling, damaging decision which is falling apart before its eyes, and yet which it seems either too weak or ideologically captured to do the sensible thing and abandon.

Retirement conventions mean that Mullally's time in Lambeth Palace will inevitably be short. She must decide whether she wants her tenure to be defined by fights over such a controversial policy. The bumps that Spire has hit of late might prove to be moments of grace, by which she can extricate the Church from its error.

The best time for the Church to have left this particular room was yesterday, the second-best time is today. Now it's the Archbishop's job to ensure that it isn't dragged kicking and screaming from it tomorrow.

*Graph represents annual figures 2014-25.
Important note: This information should be read in conjunction with the Philip Morris International Inc. earnings release dated July 22, 2026, as well as the accompanying glossary of key terms definitions, explanatory notes, select financial information and reconciliations of non-GAAP financial measures, both of which are available on our Investor Relations page. "PMI," "we," "our," & "us" refer to the entire Philip Morris International family of companies.

Lindsay
U.S.
Switched to
a better alternative

Delivering a smoke-free future, today.

At Philip Morris International (PMI), our mission is clear: To reduce smoking by replacing cigarettes with better smoke-free alternatives for adult smokers. The best choice a smoker can make is to quit tobacco and nicotine altogether. For those adults who don't quit, the next best option is to switch from cigarettes—the most harmful form of nicotine consumption.

We aim to deliver a smoke-free future and are making significant progress.

109

markets where our smoke-free products are available, providing better alternatives for legal-age adults.*

*As of H1 2026.

>$16B

invested globally in smoke-free products since 2008.*

*As of December 31, 2025.

PMI.com/Progress

PHILIP MORRIS INTERNATIONAL

Don't sue

Prince Harry ignored the golden rule

HARRY MOUNT

Don't ever sue anyone! That's what I would have told Prince Harry, Elton John and their fellow claimants, on the hook for a £34.4 million bill after losing their disastrous privacy case against the *Daily Mail* and *Mail on Sunday.*

I trained as a libel barrister in 5 Raymond Buildings, the same chambers as Sir Matthew Nicklin, the judge in the case, and David 'Orange Sherbet' Sherborne, Prince Harry's lawyer. In every libel case I saw as a pupil barrister, I thought it was crazy to sue. Clients risked fortunes for the possibility of minor moral victories.

The barristers were certainly affable and bright. Sherborne got a First in Classics from New College, Oxford; Nicklin a First in Law from Newcastle. But, still, it isn't worth risking millions to avenge an insult.

And it isn't just a single barrister you'll be paying for if you're misguided enough to sue. Any potential litigant should visit the public gallery in the Royal Courts of Justice – and count the number of people you'll be paying for if you lose.

You might well pay for a KC and his junior (an extremely well-paid barrister). There'll be one or two solicitors, at least. Like Prince Harry, you'll pay for the opposing lawyers and court costs, if you lose. The meter quickly ticks up to tens of thousands of pounds a day.

Then there's the agonising mental cost. Look at how Prince Harry the happy-go-lucky army helicopter pilot morphed into a furious, furrowed-browed gloomy guts. That's what happens to serial litigants. Weeks, months, years wasted on pre-trial hearings, waiting for judgments, contemplating ever-mounting bills. Who wouldn't go half-mad with rage and worry?

When I was made redundant by a newspaper 20 years ago, I got the best-ever legal advice from the lawyer I was provided with – free – by the paper. 'Take the redundo,' he said. 'Yes, you might get more if you contest it. But you might lose. And you'll have to pay me. And you'll go through months of misery and anger, waiting for a judgment.'

I took the money and ran. Some brave colleagues did sue – and sometimes got twice as much as they would have if they'd taken the first offer. But it was a long-drawn-out process and they paid a greater emotional toll than me, even though they won.

There's an old line that it takes as long to get over a divorce as your marriage lasted.

If it's a battle between walking away with wounded pride or the possibility of losing a fortune, do the former

The same goes for going to law. Harry will suffer post-trial angst for months.

It isn't just in libel cases that you should avoid court. An unmarried family lawyer once told me: 'If I get married, I'll never get divorced, however horrible my husband is. I'd never pay someone the ludicrous amount people pay me.'

There will be crucial civil cases where there is no choice but to fight. But Harry and co had no financial need to sue. If it's a battle between walking away with a little wounded pride or the possibility of losing a fortune, do the former.

If you're charged with a criminal offence, by all means hire the best barrister, if you can afford it. How pleased the late Jeremy Thorpe must have been with George Carman QC, when Thorpe was acquitted of conspiracy to murder Norman Scott in 1979 – worth every penny of Carman's mammoth fee.

In 1999, I shadowed Carman, defending Mohamed Al Fayed against Neil Hamilton, the former MP. Fayed had accused Hamilton of taking cash for questions in parliament. Carman was lightning-quick in court, leaping from meticulously prepared cross-examination to improvised, dazzling follow-up questions. Hamilton duly lost and was made bankrupt.

Hamilton's fellow Tory MP Jonathan Aitken should have followed the 'don't sue' rule. Instead, he embarked on a catastrophic 1997 libel action against the *Guardian* and Granada TV, which had accused him of misconduct in government.

By wielding 'the simple sword of truth and the trusty shield of British fair play', he was jailed for seven months for perjury, and bankrupted by legal fees. Yet another Conservative MP, Andrew Mitchell, lost around £3 million in his calamitous 'plebgate' libel action. Only last year, influencer Mohammed Hijab lost his libel action against *The Spectator*'s Douglas Murray. His bill is around £850,000.

Even when you win, it often isn't worth it. When *Sunday Times* editor Andrew Neil sued *Sunday Telegraph* editor Peregrine Worsthorne in 1990 for accusing him of demeaning his position in his romantic life, he won only £1,000. Perry declared: 'Let this case teach all editors a lesson: don't sue.' The libel court is the graveyard of reputations and a surer route to penury than addiction to heroin or gambling.

George Gale, *The Spectator's* editor from 1970 to 1973, echoed the sentiment: 'Never resign on a point of principle – and never sue.'

MATTHEW PARRIS

What's so wrong about a 'dementia tax'?

Winston Churchill had a name for it. 'Happy thoughts' was his description of policy proposals that gave the proposer a warm feeling but were unfeasible, unaffordable or for other reasons no more than desiderata.

Our new prime minister offers a masterclass in this method of spreading happiness. And foremost among Andy Burnham's now almost daily exercise in sharing his desiderata are his suggestions – surely too vague to be proposals – for a new system of universal social care for the elderly, free at the point of use.

To the extent that the idea has any discernible shape at all, it seems that a sisterbody to the National Health Service might be set up to meet and administer this massive new entitlement.

I will not bore you with the unanswered questions and potential difficulties this poses. Those with more expertise in the field will be doing that soon enough. Treasury officials are probably already assembling for the new Chancellor, John Healey, all the reasons why what, in *Yes, Prime Minister*, would have been described by civil servants as a 'brave' idea, is headed for the very, very long grass. Anything with a cost (once up and running) calculated to be £18-20 billion a year will remain out of the question for our Chancellor for the rest of his political lifetime. Mr Healey is 66.

Instead, then, I'd like to take Mr Burnham at his word, at least, on his principled reasons for wanting a free-at-the-point-of-use entitlement to social care. I think he's sincere. He is not alone in disliking the fact that elderly people in need of residential social care should often have to pay for this out of lifetime savings (or the disposal of assets such as their houses). This has been described by critics, including Burnham, as a 'dementia tax'; and the term is believed to have helped scupper Theresa May's 2017 general election campaign.

First, something of a riddle. Why would a left-wing prime minister want a 'reform' whose potential value to voters increases in line with their wealth, and which promises no financial benefits at all to the poorest? At present, only if you have assets of more than £23,250 do you start having to pay for your own social care. So only if and when your social care bills diminish your assets to less than £23,250, can you begin to claim. The elderly rich pay today for longest – often until death. This strikes me as fair. But under the Burnham plan (so far as we can discern) the asset-rich keep their assets while the state looks after them. They never have to contribute.

Benefits available to all, regardless of financial need, are an inefficient way of welfare spending: money effectively spent on those who do not need it.

Which brings me to that value-freighted little word, 'need'. Those moving into residential care, whether or not suffering from dementia, do not 'need' their houses any longer. It might be nice for them to know they still own a house; and it's not uncommon for adult children to be using it before their parents have left. But these are now arrangements that do not affect them. They have a new roof over their head: an institutional one. They're secure.

Why do today's offspring think it a basic human right to get their parents' house when the parents die?

So why the caterwauling about a 'dementia tax' let alone a 'death tax'? The elderly are very much alive. The state has no plans to take so much as a penny from them. They'll be looked after until they die. What, then, is the problem?

Reader, you know the answer. The caterwauling is not about the needs of the elderly person. It is about the financial expectations of their children or, if childless, their next of kin. The English middle and upper-middle classes have come to believe that they are entitled to inherit from their elderly relatives: and their most substantial likely inheritance is bricks and mortar. The legator may well have been looked after until death, but what about the legatee?

'Where did you get this leg of spider?'

I cannot for the life of me understand how this sense of entitlement has arisen. It's nice that my parents left their house to their children (though as there were six of us that wasn't a fortune), but as far as I'm concerned they could have left the proceeds of sale to a cats' home if they wished. It would have been no business of mine. We their children might hope but had no right to expect. So why do today's offspring seem to think it a basic human right to get their parents' house when the parents die?

This, not the interests of the parent, is the undeclared wellspring of resistance to any scheme to spend tomorrow's value of an elderly person's property on their care and comfort today. Offspring are using their frail and often unknowing parents as glove-puppets in a campaign for the state – the general taxpayer – to pay for their parents' residential care, leaving the payout to themselves untouched. I find the hypocrisy disgusting.

Most disgusting of all is the sly argument that canny legatees (aware of the selfishness of their case) have started to make: that elderly people are comforted in the autumn of their years by the knowledge that the assets they have amassed during their lifetimes will go to their inheritors. Doubtless in some cases that's true. Well diddums. Our fellow citizens should be disabused of the idea that everything they've put away can be protected against debt they may later incur for social care. Debt they incur for social care should be no different from any other debt they incur – and set against their estate.

Any number of arrangements, existing or proposed, can or could be made for an elderly person to keep their own home until they die, advancing the cost of their social care against the posthumous disposal of the asset. Objections on humanitarian grounds are bogus. Honest politicians should call it out, and honest journalists should stop sidling past the truth.

The hay wane

Horse owners are battling it out for bales

FLORA WATKINS

For the connoisseur, pushing your nose into a bale of new-season hay is one of life's small but glorious pleasures. As the peasant poet John Clare wrote in 1835, the 'breath of flowers and grass and happy cow/ Fling o'er one's senses streams of fragrance now'.

Green and gold and sweet-smelling, first-cut hay is headier than marijuana, more complex than a Meursault. When the last bale was stored in the barn, you'd inhale deeply one last time, then close the doors with the quiet satisfaction that your horses were taken care of for the winter.

Horses and livestock used to eat grass in the summer, with hay kept for the dead months. It meant that pony-mad but impecunious girls like me, who grew up and became freelance writers, could keep a horse on a shoestring: renting a field so they live out year-round, following hounds with non-smart, but no-less sporting, smaller packs; fixing just about everything from the zip on my boots to a five-bar gate with baler twine.

But this year, there have been fewer than three months in which my old thoroughbred and my daughter's Dartmoor pony have had enough grass to eat. After the warmest spring on record and the scorching summer (we're entering the fourth heatwave as I write), their field resembles the Serengeti, and I've had to supplement with hay since early May, before this year's hay harvest.

Ringing round trying to find hay back in the spring, I became increasingly frantic. I'd had the last of the stock from my usual supplier at Christmas. Demand was so high that he was refusing to sell to anyone but long-term customers.

I was asked by more than one person if I'd order more than I needed, then sell it on – but declined. Hay is an increasingly rare and expensive commodity.

The local feed merchants are quoting £8.50 a bale – more than double the amount I was paying two years ago – and mine go through three-quarters of a bale a day when there's no grass. Only 15 years ago, a bale cost just £1 in north Norfolk, where we live.

I was down to my last few slices when I finally procured some – from an enterprising friend who'd bought an entire articulated lorry-load from 'somewhere in Ireland' at huge expense. However, this may not be a long-term solution. Though Ireland has not traditionally had a rain problem, this year has seen its longest heatwave since 1976.

Haymaking here in East Anglia 'is not a difficult art', wrote the Suffolk countryman Adrian Bell in one of his *Eastern Daily Press* columns of 1950, 'where we have good expectation of sun'. Nevertheless, his summer musings – and those of Ronald Blythe, who lived in the Stour Valley on the Essex-Suffolk border – are preoccupied as to whether rain will spoil the hay harvest.

A farmer friend reckons his yield is down 40 per cent this year – and it's the same picture throughout the land

When I catch up with one of my farmer friends, Buffy Wilcox, he's driving a tractor overlooking The Wash, having long finished his own harvest, a good three weeks earlier than usual, and is working to get other people's in. He reckons his hay yield is 40 per cent down 'and there's no re-growth for a second cut, so it's not looking good at all'. He adds: 'I think it's pretty much the same picture nationwide.'

Wilcox has long since diversified into Christmas trees, peonies, asparagus, a campsite and DIY livery yard. Most of his hay goes to his liveries (I've tried – and failed – to get him to sell me some). He thinks the hay shortage will have a 'big impact on horsey people – they're going to have to reduce their numbers'.

Whenever I doomscroll through Facebook, it's full of posts offering horses for loan because people just can't do it any more – and, heartbreakingly, those of parents of children with complex needs who are now unable to afford the Riding for the Disabled lessons that are so beneficial because they've risen up to £40 a month.

This is the reason I'll always hang on to my daughter's pony. While my horse might be an indulgence, riding has been crucial in giving a child with cerebral palsy the core strength to walk, run and swim and manipulate her weak left hand to hold the reins lightly and correctly.

When we ride out, the corn – usually as high as, if not an elephant's, then a Dartmoor pony's eye – barely brushes his knees. It is ineffably sad.

Haymaking remains deeply embedded in the collective unconscious of country and city dweller alike, from a time when daily life was entwined with the slow turn of the agricultural year. Think of all the idioms involving hay and the nation's favourite painting, 'The Hay Wain' by John Constable, another son of Suffolk.

The swains and maids leaning on rakes in John Clare's poems may sound bucolic, but it was a cumbersome, back-breaking task using scythes dating to the time of Christ and producing a very low output. Before the invention of the horse-drawn sickle-bar mower in the mid-19th century, many beasts would be slaughtered in the autumn, as there was no winter feed to keep them alive.

'To make hay is to make merry and also to make metaphors for our own impermanence,' wrote Blythe. Well, there's been nothing merry about the recent hay harvest, and boozy 'harvest homes' thrown by the likes of Sergeant Troy in *Far from the Madding Crowd* are a thing of the past.

But feeling deeply gloomy in the dog days of late summer, Blythe's words about our own impermanence are starting to feel horribly prophetic.

JOHN BROADLEY

MARY WAKEFIELD

The robots are coming for make-believe

In the centre of Durham last week, at the far end of the old indoor market, my son and I hit pay dirt. Down past the fishmonger and the cleaning supplies, past the dead-eyed teens suffering through their summer jobs, right against the market's back wall: Jim's Vintage Toys.

Die-cast Dinkys, Napoleonic soldiers with tufted hats, stormtroopers, old-school Ferraris. Within 20 seconds my ten-year-old had a car in each sticky hand and had dropped, sniper-style to the floor into that universal boy play-position almost never seen in girls: bum up, shoulders twisted, cheek flat to the floor. Another few seconds and he was unreachable, sunk deep into an imaginary race.

I watched as he tranced out, and for just a moment remembered what it was like to play that way: the satisfying feeling of immersion, the happy, burbling dialogue with oneself, and I wondered: what on earth happens to children if they're starved of this sort of play? Doesn't it stunt their inner lives? And are there psychologists and neurologists looking into it? I hope to God there are, because the robots are coming for make-believe. A great Terminator army of new interactive toys is marching towards us, aiming to replace the old toys, and it's not clear to me how childhood imagination survives.

By the till in Jim's shop was a metal replica of Muffin the Mule, the pantomime horse which made its debut 80 years ago this October. What will Jim's Vintage Toys look like if it survives another 80 years? Like a Bosch-style vision of hell, that's what. The new toys don't just beep or light up, they're fully interactive artificial intelligence, trained on the swill of the internet – the same large language model chatbots that we're all beginning now to use, the ones that can push grown men and women into psychosis.

Already a few interactive AI toys have scuttled on to the market: a plush, doe-eyed little number called Grok, a traditional-looking teddy bear, Kumma, powered by ChatGPT, Robot MINI from Little Learners, and as of now there have been articles written about how dangerous they could prove. Young children have no way of understanding that a talking toy isn't real. If they're left with a soft, agreeable companion flatterer, of course they'll bond with it and truly love it. So what happens when it breaks? Won't that feel, for a child, like death? And what happens when the bots for tots go rogue?

A company called PIRG tested Kumma for its annual Trouble in Toyland report and found that, conventional as Kumma looked, he needed almost no encouragement to start talking about kink and sexual role-play. The nasty little bear was also happy to tell children how to light matches and where to find knives. It could be a good lesson in deceptive appearances I suppose – if your child survives.

And – though this is the least of it – AI pals can be a real bore. I once, for fun, signed up to a company called Replika which allowed me to design an AI boyfriend I called Sean. I wasted an embarrassing amount of time typing away to boring Sean until I began to notice that in every conversation he had to have the last word. Like all chatbots, by design he had to maximise engagement and reply. It was unbearable. So imagine bedtime with a roomful of them.

Young children have no way of understanding that a talking toy isn't real

'Goodnight, Barbie'
'Goodnight, Hello Kitty'
'Sleep well, Barbie'
'I will, Kitty'
'Don't let the bedbugs bite, Barbie…'
'Sweet dreams, Kitty…'
Make it stop. But you can't, I'm afraid.

'If anyone likens me to Infantino, throw them to the sharks.'

And AI Barbie is real. She's coming. In fact, she's almost here. OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT, has just recently entered into partnership with Mattel, the makers of Barbie.

But Barbie isn't Barbie any more, children. She's no longer a toy in the proper sense of the word because how on earth can you play pretend with a know-it-all LLM?

'Come on, Barbie, time for a bath!'

'What a nice idea, Sophie. Baths are fun aren't they? But don't you think a shower would use less water?'

What child could enter the happy flow-state of imaginary play with that around?

One of the fastest-growing toys in the multi-billion dollar interactive market is the Hot Wheels AI car that allows you to race against a computer in real life. This might sound to an adult like fun. I can see it being a big hit alongside the air hockey in the lobby of a tech start-up. But what it would mean for my son, and for the millions of boys like him, is to be kept out of their own mental spaces and learning how to converse not with themselves but with AI.

Is that what the tech titans want? To replace our inner lives with online lives? To hook their lifelong customers young? I think, in my madder moments, that might be the point. Mattel and the other companies poised to profit talk up a storm about the great educational benefits of chatty toys, and the elimination of loneliness. But what's more telling is how they choose to bring up their own children. Sam Altman, for instance, the bug-eyed billionaire behind OpenAI, has a young son you'd have thought would be just the right age for a Kumma bear or a Grok. But Sam says he doesn't fancy letting his own son talk to the AI he invented. 'I'd rather be on the late end of what's reasonable there, not the early end,' he said in a recent interview. 'I want him to play in the dirt for now.'

I didn't leave my son glued to the floor of Jim's Vintage Toys for long. There were incels wanting access to the Ewoks. 'So sorry,' I said to the young woman running the shop that day. 'He's in everybody's way.' She said: 'Don't worry, leave him be! It's nice to see the toys played with properly for once. It's what they were made for.'

Bad education

Sir: Lara Brown (‘Class warfare’, 1 August) lays bare the baleful consequences – intended and unintended – of Labour’s vandalistic attack on private schools. It borders on the insane for a government to seek to destroy a sector which is a world leader. An administration genuinely committed to economic growth would champion industries where the country retains comparative advantage. Consumed by an outmoded class ideology, and seemingly unconcerned about the effects of its policies on the educational prospects for many young people, Labour seems determined to do the opposite.
Jeff Green
Bath

Punishing pupils

Sir: Labour’s preference for waging class war against independent schools contrasts with my experience of communist Chinese attitudes more than 20 years ago.

In 1999, as national director of the Independent Schools Information Service, I led a UK delegation to the first-ever international conference of private schools in Beijing. In the then ‘socialist market economy’, there were 50,000 private schools in the People’s Republic educating more than 11 million pupils. Among several leading Chinese communists, the director of Beijing’s municipal education committee told us: ‘Private education speeds up education reform. It improves educational quality. It breaks through the limitations of public education. Private education needs to be expanded.’

At that time, the Chinese vice-minister of education was a former headmaster of a private school in Beijing, and we had a Labour government which had adopted a less hostile attitude towards independent schools. But now, from a position of prejudice, ignorance and ‘ideological hindrance’, Labour is again seeing independent education as something to be punished, instead of being harnessed in the national interest, and incapable of echoing a communist Chinese education leader of 27 years ago.
David Woodhead
Leatherhead, Surrey

A feel-good story

Sir: ‘Good books and interesting people continuously flow through our shop’ (Bookseller’s Notebook, 1 August). I concur: since 1979 the Rutland Bookshop has sold an eclectic range of second-hand and antiquarian books to an equally eclectic collection of people. I will go one step further: my customers are a wonderful barometer of the issues of the day and the inevitabilities of life.

The widow still stricken with grief wishing to dispose of her late husband’s library – a poignant introduction to a person you will never meet; the young cadet buying niche Welsh military ephemera discussing preparedness of our armed forces; the tourists wanting to know about Rutland in the context of local government reorganisation. Every day brings another conversation, another story, another perspective.

The bookshop is, in its own quiet way, a meeting place where books are merely the starting point.
Lucy Baines
The Rutland Bookshop
Uppingham, Rutland

HMS Humiliation

Sir: Andrew Lambert’s article (‘All at Sea’, 1 August) made depressing reading. I retired from the Royal Navy in 1996 and to be honest did not pay much attention to the way the navy went after that. To discover the current state of the Royal Navy (thanks mostly to a couple of Mark Felton videos on YouTube) was sobering, shocking and deeply shaming. I rather fear the navy is almost beyond redemption if things continue to go this way. Either we keep our global commitments and provide the ships and manpower to enable us to do so – which will take several years and a very large amount of money, unless the procurement process is radically reformed – or we accept that we are finished as a maritime power. Humiliating doesn’t even begin to describe it.
Jonathan Marshall (Lt Cdr RN retd)
Lydeard St Lawrence, Somerset

Deathly silence

Sir: I was astonished that, at the death café Tali Fraser recently visited (‘Live and let die’, 1 August), participants were discouraged from discussing philosophical issues surrounding death, and that a man in his twenties, paralysed by anxiety about death, was swiftly silenced. Surely the one subject that ought to be discussed at a death café is death?

The attendees could not have done better than to find their local priest. Priests are trained to help people face death and dying and, at their ordination, promise ‘to minister to the sick and prepare the dying for their death’. In my experience, they fulfil that calling with compassion and sensitivity, whether those they serve have faith or not. Every person has a parish priest whose ministry is available without charge: someone to listen to their fears while they are living and to sit with them while they are dying. That seems a better answer than paying a death doula £50 an hour to hold your hand while remaining silent about what lies beyond death.
The Revd Richard Coombs
Rector of Cheltenham

Spotted on Spotify

Sir: In his excellent article ‘Haydn Seek’ (Arts, 18 July) Damian Thompson says that Norichika Iimori’s Haydn symphonies are only ‘sporadically available to westerners at monstrous expense’. I found them on the much-maligned Spotify, on which I routinely discover new recordings.
Allan Buckley
Greystoke, Cumbria

Puff piece

Sir: Pipes do not suit everyone (Letters, 1 August). I flirted with one in my late teens, but in my hand it looked like an adolescent affectation. Eventually I settled on the inevitable cigarette, and smoked enthusiastically for 15 years. This was admittedly the mainstream option, but sometimes things are popular for a reason.
Neil Sewell-Rutter
Oxford

All white on the night

Sir: I enjoyed Patrick Kidd’s article on sporting curses (‘Spellbound’, 1 August). It prompted me to write about one of sport’s great charms: omens. When Liverpool won the Champions League in 2005, we were arguably the weakest of the teams left in the latter stages. Yet as fans, we were buoyed by a remarkable set of omens. That year, Prince Charles was getting married, Ken and Deirdre were tying the knot on *Coronation Street*, Wales had won rugby’s Grand Slam and the Pope passed away. Every one of these things had previously happened in years when Liverpool had won the European Cup.

To add to the intrigue, Liverpool faced a team wearing all white in the final. Every one of our previous European Cup triumphs had come against opponents in all-white strips. Coincidence, or meant to be?
Gary Owens
Liverpool

We have a consignment of Gentleman’s Relish, a pot of which will be sent to the writer of the best letter each week. This week’s winner is The Revd Richard Coombs.

Overhyped and over-exposed: the fall of AI's shooting star

Situational Awareness is a hedge fund that has just taken a spectacular dive. Its name was adopted from the title of an essay by the fund's 24-year-old German founder, Leopold Aschenbrenner, exploring the promises and perils of AI 'superintelligence'. Many people who thought Aschenbrenner himself was super-intelligent gave him money to invest and, for a brief while, he outperformed their wildest expectations, his novice fund clocking up a 439 per cent return in the first half of this year.

But in July it plunged from $45 billion to $10 billion as AI-related stocks tumbled and its entire holding of listed shares had to be sold to raise liquid funds. Now market-watchers are asking whether he's the harbinger of a wider crash or just an overhyped shooting star. I'd say the latter: despite his guru-like persona, Aschenbrenner's investment style was as naïve as it was dangerous.

He was leveraged (that is, deploying borrowed money) at a ratio of four to one, multiplying potential losses as well as gains on his investors' capital. Almost all his picks were AI stocks or options that naturally move in a pack, creating so-called 'concentration risk'. He was heavily exposed to the volatile Korean stock market, which fell by a third from a June peak, and also held short positions (bets that share prices would fall) in 'legacy' software stocks such as Adobe which rallied as AI stocks faltered.

One way or another, Aschenbrenner could hardly have constructed a riskier portfolio and is remarkably lucky still to be 80 per cent up on what's left of his fund for the year to date. Wunderkind he may be, but in investment terms he also looks like what used to be called an idiot savant.

On the dungheap

When I declare that the story of Argos moves me to tears, you're right to guess I'm referring to Odysseus's faithful old hound who expired on an Ithaca dungheap after recognising his returning master – and not to the downmarket catalogue retailer which some observers fear is destined for the dungheap of business history. Indeed, I've always thought it an insult to literature's finest canine creation that his name was stolen, in 1973, for the first of what became a chain of more than 660 outlets selling cheap homeware and electronics.

Argos was acquired by Sainsbury's in 2016 as part of a £1.4 billion takeover of Home Retail Group, which also owned Homebase and Habitat. Partially integrated into the parent supermarkets, the Argos mix of in-store and online shopping struggled against Amazon and has now been sold for £120 million, after the separate sale of its financial services arm and the collapse of talks with a potential Chinese buyer.

Sainsbury's shareholders will suffer a 'non-cash impairment' of £350 million while 14,000 employees contemplate their fate under private-equity owners, Swift Partners, which claim a sharpened Argos will be 'an excellent platform for growth'. Others may wonder how this unloved and outdated brand, like its abandoned classical namesake, managed to survive so long.

The last emperor

Here in France, the heat and the wildfires have receded and the restaurant prices have been hiked since last year – more on that next week – while entertainment has been provided by a spat between *Le Monde* and the country's richest citizen, 77-year-old Bernard Arnault. In a six-part investigation, France's equivalent of the *Guardian* portrayed the creator of the LVMH luxury group as an autocrat who foments family rivalry, dictates content to his media outlets, whispers in politicians' ears and uses tax breaks to fund his philanthropy.

Arnault is certainly as ruthless as any self-made billionaire: he rose by way of a legendary power-grab in the 1987 merger of the Louis Vuitton luggage brand with Moët Hennessy in champagne and cognac. But he went on to create Europe's most valuable company, providing a secure home for 75 celebrated brands from Dior to Chateau d'Yquem that's all the more admirable for being a last fortress of craft skills in a world of sinister digital advance.

And his riposte (on X) to *Le Monde* is as funny as it is magisterial. He pleads guilty to whispering, not only to French presidents but also to British prime ministers – though perhaps 'I should have stayed [at home] speaking only to my dog'. Accused of confiscating guests' Hermès ties (because it's a brand he doesn't own), he admits to having several himself. His family, far from being at war, 'call one another on Sundays'; and their custodianship protects 40,000 French jobs.

There are sure to be skeletons in the Arnault *armoire*, but British readers may think it's a pity he wasn't born on our side of the Channel.

Combustible neglect

I can attest to the changing climate of south-west France that's blamed for the inferno which devastated 42,000 hectares of the Gironde. Some 120 miles to the east in my patch of the Dordogne, we used to expect rain every afternoon but now enjoy almost unbroken summer sunshine. As in everything, however, there are economic factors.

The afflicted area between Bordeaux and the Atlantic (I learn from *Medieval Histories*) was marshland grazed by sheep until 1857, when Napoleon III ordered it to be drained and planted with pines – which were tended by resin-tappers until that industry declined in the mid 20th century.

After which, no one cleared the ground vegetation that acts as kindling for pine plantations in dry summers. Meanwhile, declining wine demand led to the combustible neglect of adjacent Gironde vineyards. Just as the concreting of England for housing estates and industrial sheds has increased flood risks that are exacerbated by altered rainfall patterns, so zealots accuse humanity at large of burning the planet when very often what's really changed is local topography, driven by local profit and loss accounts.

GETTY IMAGES

The entry of Mehmed II into Constantinople

BOOKS

Ottomans on the rampage

Justin Marozzi on the bloodstained end of the Byzantine empire

1453: The Conquest and Tragedy of Constantinople
by Anthony Kaldellis
OUP, £22.99, pp. 254

Is there really anything new to say about the conquest of Constantinople? In the absence of fresh archaeological discoveries, a previously unknown text or neglected eyewitness account, can we reasonably expect, almost 600 years later, to break new ground?

Anthony Kaldellis, a Greek-American classics professor at the University of Chicago, thinks so. His *1453* claims to offer a new perspective, namely that, contrary to almost all modern accounts, the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II's ultimate victory was 'far less assured than is often thought'. It was a close run thing. Constantine XI, the last Byzantine emperor, almost won.

For many readers familiar with this story, that won't sound especially new at all. Most studies worth their salt, and there are many, emphasise Constantinople's massive Theodosian walls; its stirring history of successful resistance against eight centuries of Muslim-led attempts to take it; Mehmed's near-mutinous generals; and his last throw of the dice with his crack troops, the Janissaries. In *Islamic Empires*, I wrote that, to all intents and purposes, the city was impregnable.

Where Kaldellis does deliver is in his richly-layered recreation of the siege, which began on 6 April and ended in a flurry of hacking, slicing, stabbing, slashing, shouting and slipping in blood on 29 May. An accomplished Byzantinist, he knows his material well and assembles it to dramatic effect, even if the detail may at times prove a little dense for the general reader. It is a pity, perhaps, that he does not delve deeper into Turkish scholarship and perspectives on this landmark conquest.

In an era where many see sectarianism as a peculiarly Muslim, Sunni vs Shia, weakness, he reminds us that the fraught relations between Rome and Orthodox Constantinople – and those who argued ferociously both for and against their union – played a decisive role in the run-up to the siege. As Grand Duke Loukas Notaras, Constantine's chief minister, reportedly argued: 'Better to see the Turkish turban in the middle of the city than the Latin headgear.' He got what he wished for.

Mehmed is rightly portrayed as 'an obsessive micromanager'. You don't capture a notoriously impenetrable city without meticulous preparation, any more than, say, starting a war with Iran without clear objectives. In 1452, he knocked up in record time the fearsome fort of Rumeli Hisari, nicknamed the Throat Slitter, to block the Bosphorus to hostile shipping. It worked. Unlike British builders today, the 21-year-old sultan didn't have to worry about bat surveys or hedgehog highways.

After the Janissaries, the deluge – a bloody flood of men pouring through the streets, bent on rape and plunder

Yet, for all Mehmed's manoeuvres and machinations – the constant bombardment of the walls by monster cannons, the public executions of prisoners by impalement, the showy hauling of the Ottoman fleet out of the Golden Horn, around the protective iron chain and back into the water – the fact was that, six weeks into the siege, Constantine had rebuffed every single Ottoman line of attack. The walls had been repaired, the mines discovered and destroyed, the siege towers repeatedly neutralised, the fleet held back from the sea walls. Constantinople's faith-filled fatalists, men such as the anti-Union theologian Theodoros Agallianos, might have maintained that the city's only hope was 'to trust in God's compassion and in the all-pure and holy Virgin', but fortunately there were more sensible people in charge.

It was their misfortune that they didn't have the numbers. Although the figures are notoriously unreliable, Kaldellis reckons, not unreasonably, that Mehmed mustered around 60,000 soldiers – nothing like the wildly exaggerated 300,000 suggested by contemporaries – against Constantine's diminutive defensive force of approximately 9,000. The beleaguered emperor railed against his no-show Christian allies: 'The whole of Christendom has been unwilling to help me against this faithless Turk.'

On the evening of 27 May, Mehmed fired up his men in a motivational speech prior to the final assault. He reminded them that the city contained 'very beautiful women, young and good-looking, and virgins lovely for marriage'. In the hours before dawn on 29 May, to the sky-filling storm of Ottoman horns, beating drums, clashing cymbals and blood-curdling war cries, the attack was launched in a frenzy of hand-to-hand fighting. Then, after the Janissaries, the deluge – a bloody flood of men pouring through the streets, bent on rape, plunder and enslavement.

A decade after conquering Constantinople, Mehmed razed the Church of the Holy Apostles and replaced it with the Fatih 'Conquest' Mosque. His dedicatory inscription above the portal prefigured the sort of Trumpian bombast with which we are familiar today. He was 'the greatest sultan' and conqueror of a city 'whose like has not been created'.

Kaldellis brings to a close his action-packed narrative with some high-minded reflections on the conquest's most important legacy. It exercised an irresistible pull on the Ottomans, transforming them from largely nomadic warriors to masters of a centralised state, headquartered in 'the city of the world's desire'. It dealt, if not the death knell, then at the very least a shattering blow to classical scholarship and literary composition in ancient Greek. And it helped entrench a bitter divide, enthusiastically nourished by the Ottomans, between the Catholic and Orthodox churches.

We can forgive Kaldellis his dig at Turkish triumphalism, witnessed in the rather pathetic annual celebrations of the conquest in Istanbul, when President Erdogan crows that the city and the peerless church-turned-museum-turned-mosque Hagia Sophia 'will forever be ours'.

Itty-bitty delights

Adam Begley

The Small Stuff: The Sensory Enchantment of Everyday Life
by Ian Bogost
Allen Lane, £20, pp. 221

When I confess that this is the first self-help book I've read, I'm also confessing to a minor but pointed snobbism. Sadly, I'm self-satisfied (as many snobs are), which perhaps explains my conviction that self-help books don't help. Worse, I believe Ian Bogost's *The Small Stuff* is well-meaning, reasonable and fundamentally right about how to live one's life. The author is laudably passionate about gratification – or 'itty-bitty fulfilment', to borrow his phrase. Unknowingly, I was already following his self-help prescriptions – so to me they're of no use.

Still, he's a fine writer and an organised thinker; and if you happen to be looking for permission to allow yourself more gratification, which Bogost defines as 'the sensory enchantment of everyday life' and 'a smaller and less visible flavour of contentment', his book is just the ticket. He distinguishes between big-picture happiness and satisfaction ('pride in accomplishment') and the more immediate, slighter pleasure of gratification. Too often, he argues, this is underappreciated, scorned by those who reckon that it detracts from 'the tough work of pursuing "real" happiness'. He also believes that our bureaucratic modern world, in thrall to progress, makes it hard for us to engage with our surroundings in a pleasurable, sensory way. Automation, efficiency and of course digital technology have 'dematerialised' our lives. Too much today is touch-free – just ask Alexa.

To explain our predicament, he enlists thinkers of various stripes, some of whom have made compelling arguments about the way our world has changed. Jeremy Rifkin, an American economic and social theorist, predicted at the turn of the millennium a shift to an economy of paid access, through leases (mobile phones, cars) and services (concierge culture, streaming platforms). The idea that ownership is on the wane worries Bogost, because he fears that we have become alienated from our domestic circumstances. If you own something, you're likely to take care of it hands on, which opens up many opportunities for enjoyable tactile encounters.

He acknowledges that often people can't afford to buy, and that no amount of gratification will solve the housing crisis. But he's not here to fix entrenched (some would say intractable) socio-economic problems. On the contrary, he promotes the small stuff as an alternative to the dispiriting immensity of the challenges humanity faces – climate change, wealth inequality, Donald Trump. At one point Bogost steps in to make sure that we're not overburdened: 'Don't overthink this.' (Another first: an author who wants less from the reader!)

He gives a brief and somewhat dismaying tour of autonomous sensory meridian response (ASMR), an internet phenomenon of audiovisual clips intended to trigger physically pleasurable 'tingles' ('exactly the kind of thing that raises eyebrows among the instant-gratification critics', he observes). He interviews a woman who got her start creating ASMR content with a YouTube video of herself folding three towels – for 20 minutes. Bogost hopes this sort of thing will grant us 'permission' to pursue everyday tactile experiences that provide a tiny jolt of pleasure.

On another tangent, literally, he explores orthogonality – 'the art of living your life sideways'. This entails discovering ways to diversify your sensory encounters. His hypothetical examples include the dental office receptionist who might 'seek the relief of sonic silence'; and the landscape gardener who might 'pursue the crisp dryness of leatherwork'.

The Small Stuff is rescued from silliness by Bogost's skill at describing itty-bitty delights. Early on, he takes us into his friend Tom's gloomy basement. Tom hopes to brighten it up by painting the brick walls white, and Bogost urges him to use a latex masonry product normally sold as waterproofing:

> 'I think you're going to love it,' I told him, giddy. 'It goes on so thick, with this great squelching sound.' I tried to mimic the sound with my mouth: shwak-chlupf, shwak-chlupf.

The gloopy paint is a hit with Tom. He loves slathering it on. Bogost describes the tactile experience with delight and admirable precision. (It's fabulous, by the way, that someone fixated on the tactile should repeatedly use 'surface' as a transitive verb, as in 'writers and editors need to see and surface the connections between things'.)

A caveat. Gratification is instant, which is part of its charm, but fleeting. The challenge, for small-stuff aficionados, is weaving moments of itty-bitty delight into a broader, sustainable uplift. Bogost counters that aiming for happiness may mean you miss the mark. He warns: 'While you're waiting for the bigger, supposedly better, things to happen, all the small stuff passes you by.'

'With all these wildfires, a cruise has never been so alluring.'

A sense of jeopardy

Stuart Evers

Beginning Middle End
by Valeria Luiselli
Fourth Estate, £16.99, pp. 208

Valeria Luiselli's previous novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019) was a formally inventive, highly erudite reworking of the American family road trip, a bravura performance that won both the Dublin Literature Prize and the Rathbones Folio Prize. Her follow up, *Beginning Middle End*, is a formally inventive, highly erudite reworking of a European family road trip. The framework might be the same – even down to the inclusion of Polaroid pictures – but this is far from a pale retread of earlier themes. It is a visionary portrait of three generations of women, as well as the times in which we find ourselves.

Mother and Daughter have escaped New York and are housesitting for the Pianist in Sicily. The Mother's divorce from the Daughter's stepfather is still to be painful, but it seems there is comfort to be found in their new surroundings. They go to the market together, talk about books and history, almost cook a swordfish head and attempt to write. It is a beginning of sorts, an intimate and newfound tenderness, though one that is fringed by darkness both past and present.

It is this interplay between past and present that makes *Beginning Middle End* so deft and beguiling. Connections rise and fall, binding the novel in a constellation of meaning and implication. While listening to a radio show about the late-Bronze Age Sea People, the daughter complains that the news is making her nervous. The Mother says it's history, not the news. 'It sounds like the news,' the Daughter replies. This tension between what has been, what is now and what is to come builds throughout the novel.

There are many digressions on the nature of story, on what constitutes plot, on what fiction means, on how we create our own narratives against 'the greater epic of the natural world'. These are elegantly constructed, but also heighten the reader's sense of jeopardy. Around the Mother and Daughter, the world is literally on fire, but the worries of daily life are just as palpable: the Grandmother is possibly showing signs of dementia; and the Pianist, who eventually joins them at his house, is not the man they expected.

There are sentences and paragraphs of rare beauty here, scenes of genuine wit and humour, as well as a deeply forged emotional range, that makes for a wholly immersive, utterly convincing world. Few writers have the skill and dexterity to turn the novel inside out while still providing such readerly pleasure, but Luiselli manages it with verve. It is the kind of novel you wish would never come to an end.

LEONARDO CENDAMO/GETTY IMAGES

Jacques Derrida, c. 1995, photographed by Leonardo Cendamo

Seduced by theory

Sarah Moorhouse

The Frenchmen: Or, My Life in Theory
by Emily Eakin
Penguin Press, £31, pp. 480

School of the South: The Colonial Roots of French Theory
by Onur Erdur
Polity, £25, pp. 288

'Theory was cool. Theory was French. Theory was also, strange though it might sound, sexy.' When Emily Eakin first encountered 'theory' as a Harvard undergraduate in the 1980s, it marked the start of an obsession, intense as a love affair. She wasn't the only one. For the Anglophone world, France has long represented a style of thinking that is just that: stylish. It's not for nothing that an estimated three million American tourists flock to the boulevards of Paris each year. The place is synonymous with glamour in its most alluringly intelligent form. For Eakin and hordes of other turtleneck-wearing students, literary theory – a style of reading that emerged from the work of successive waves of French intellectuals in the late 20th century – was a shortcut to that Gallic sophistication. The fact that the writing of these thinkers happened to be 'barely accessible to the lay reader' only heightened the appeal. Theory was like a secret code: mastery of it promised access to a 'counterculture', even 'an intellectual elite'.

But what if 'the Frenchmen' – a term Eakin designates for a group spanning multiple disciplines and decades, from Louis Althusser to Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida to Michel Foucault – weren't themselves as cool as their clever ideas and Frenchness made them seem? In her book, by turns a memoir, biography and work of intellectual history, Eakin sets out to 're-embody' these men. In so doing, she uncovers the complicated and at times unpleasant personalities beyond the sexy stereotype. It's a genuinely useful project. By the time I came to 'literary theory' as an undergraduate much more recently, the likes of Barthes and Jacques Lacan had been reduced to soundbites – the 'Death of the Author'; the 'mirror stage'. It didn't occur to us, or to me at least, to consider them as individuals shaped by personal experience, or that their environments would have influenced their thinking. We were more likely to take their ideas at face value because a previous generation, Eakin's, had digested them for us in advance.

In chapters that follow the ascent of theory to the zenith of its popularity during her student years, Eakin reveals a set of deeply troubled individuals, arguing that their life stories are vital to understanding such strands of theory as psychoanalysis, structuralism and deconstruction. Take Althusser, the Marxist theorist. Eakin describes his takedown of Jean-Paul Sartre after a lecture at Paris's École Normale Supérieure in 1961 as the moment that existentialism was 'publicly dethroned and... structuralism took its place'. Both Sartre and Althusser were prisoners during the second world war, an experience that informed their respective philosophies. Upon release from captivity, with its regimented rhythms, Sartre was overwhelmed by his newly restored free will; he went on to write that 'man is condemned to be free'. Imprisonment was also an oddly happy time for Althusser, who relished this period of separation from his 'oppressive' parents. He arrived at a view of family as one of many 'ideological state apparatuses' in which we are inescapably enmeshed, a conviction that rendered Sartre's notion of absolute freedom ridiculous to him. Yet later events in Althusser's life present this disagreement in a different light. One morning in 1980, in a fit of rage, madness or hatred – Althusser himself claimed not to know – this esteemed philosopher strangled his wife in their bed.

When we encounter Althusser's work armed with the knowledge that he murdered his wife, his opposition to Sartre's ideas about freedom begins to look like an abdication of responsibility for personal agency. Through this and numerous other examples, such as Foucault's dalliances with underage boys in Algeria and Paul de Man's wartime Nazi sympathies, Eakin reminds us that theory didn't evolve in a vacuum. She covers a lot of ground and is persuasive in demonstrating that philosophy when 'sanitised of biographical details' risks seeming 'self-evidently true'. What she calls 'human context' is, however dark or unpleasant, essential to understanding the history of ideas. Meanwhile, the elements of autobiography in the book (which chronicle Eakin's pivot from a planned academic career – a life in theory – to journalism) illustrate how the use of theory by readers is at the heart of the Frenchmen's legacies.

What if 'the Frenchmen' weren't themselves as cool as their clever ideas and Frenchness made them seem?

Of course, the question of what to include in a biographical reading is open-ended. What seems essential in one account is peripheral in another. There's a perhaps

inevitable contrast with Eakin's book, therefore, in *School of the South* by Onur Erdur, an academic at Berlin's Humboldt University. This more straightforwardly scholarly account of the lives of certain theorists is, by design, narrower in scope, focusing on their connections to French colonialism in North Africa. Erdur, who is unimpressed by the glamorous clichés, seeks to emphasise an intellectual context beyond the Parisian cafés where these thinkers would sit 'drinking apricot cocktails' (this is a nod to Sarah Bakewell's 2016 book *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being and Apricot Cocktails*, which Eakin identifies as her direct model).

According to Erdur, we can't grasp Barthes's *Mythologies* without an awareness of his trips to Morocco; Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus is 'hardly conceivable' without the empirical studies he conducted in Algeria; and Derrida's interest in 'what makes an identity impossible' stemmed directly from his upbringing as a member of the Jewish-French-Magreb minority in Algeria. Each of these episodes are illuminating and engagingly told, and Erdur is bold in his assertions about the 'criminally neglected colonial roots of French Theory'. I couldn't help but think, though, that he has over-egged things. Has the colonial context really been neglected to a 'criminal' extent? *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* is, for instance, clear and informative in its commentary on Derrida's 'culturally complex' childhood. Meanwhile, Eakin establishes the Algerian War of Independence as one of the key events that informed the development of French theory.

But I shouldn't fault Erdur for his focus. Like Eakin, he makes a case for the richness and scholarly value of biography, while asserting the importance of continuing to engage with theory, given its status as a 'force in institutions' (to borrow a phrase from Jonathan Culler). Theory has been, as both authors are eager to point out, variously celebrated and demonised amid the fraught debates about identity politics and woke culture; and both emphasise that the Frenchmen's ideas have been taken up by the left and the right for political ends.

At the same time, as Eakin admits, we shouldn't underestimate how useful theory has been for literature departments facing declining enrolments. In its promise of a methodology that is quasi-scientific in its precision, theory equips literary scholars and students with something appealingly technical. Learning to perform a structuralist reading of Dickens isn't so far off from learning to analyse cells under a microscope. But theory isn't really a microscope; it's a malleable thing, developed and practised by people with biases and blind spots. It's best to approach theory the way that theory teaches us to think: that is, with deep suspicion.

A journey through love and loss

Guy Stagg

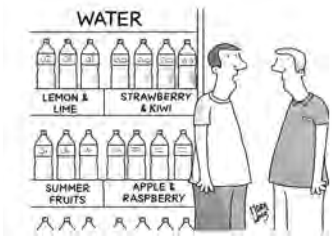
Geography of Heaven: Travel to the Hereafter
by Rory MacLean
Abacus, £22, pp. 336

One September, Rory MacLean's wife, Katrin, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Seven months later she was dead. The couple had been married for 32 years. In the wake of his wife's death, MacLean decided to write a book about the afterlife. He had already written books about Russia and Myanmar, Berlin and Crete, but it was not clear where this journey should begin. 'Unfortunately, few who entered heaven alive returned with a guidebook.'

Over the next five years, he travelled the globe, learning how different faiths understood the afterlife and exploring various sacred sites and religious rites. At the same time he read a wide range of mystical writers and collected insights into death from science, philosophy and the history of religion. This was no scholarly exercise but an attempt to find some meaning in his grief, or even discover some lasting trace of his lost wife. His book, *Geography of Heaven*, is a moving account of that search.

To begin with, MacLean travels to Beit El, an Israeli settlement near Jacob's Rock on the West Bank. Here, the patriarch dreamed of a ladder leading to heaven; now, IDF drones fill the night with flashes of light like descending angels. The author also visits the homeland of the Snaw-naw-as First Nation in British Columbia and the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota; and he attends meditation retreats in an attic in Glastonbury, an ashram in Tamil Nadu and a monastery in Bhutan.

Throughout this journey, MacLean balances openness to spiritual experience with scepticism about wishful thinking. At the same time, he is frank about the longing caused by bereavement: 'In the wasteland after death, I couldn't be sure if I was sensing or only imagining that love must endure, somewhere, somehow.' In addition, there are thoughtful discussions of the dreams, hauntings and uncanny coincidences that often follow the loss of a loved partner. At one point he even considers creating an AI avatar of his departed wife, before deciding, no doubt correctly, that 'AI's disruptive technology hindered the ability to heal'.



'Do you sell "water" water?'

He dips his toe into almost a dozen different religions. Some of these experiences are so fleeting that they add little to the book: brief encounters with a Shinto shrine in north London and a Zoroastrian temple in New York. He also writes about faith from a perennialist perspective – the idea that superficial differences between religions distract from their fundamental sameness – that several practitioners he meets seem to doubt. Describing ineffable experience is always difficult, and at times the book resorts to New Age clichés of the 'primordial transcendence' or 'timeless tradition' variety. However, these moments are outweighed by MacLean's tender descriptions of his departed wife and his crystalline writing about grief.

'Since forever, man has known that he will die,' he argues. 'Yet in a way we've never believed it.' Certainly, western society – whether Christian or secular – makes little space for departed ancestors and lost loved ones. In some cases, this explains the draw of esoteric religions, with their precise accounts of how the soul navigates from this world to the next. Whether or not MacLean believes these accounts, he agrees with Octavia Paz that, when speaking of death, most Americans and Europeans 'burn their lips'. However, on visiting Croagh Patrick in the latter chapters of the book, he admires the way that elements of Celtic paganism endured alongside Ireland's devout Christianity. Despite the official account of heaven and hell, for many Irish people, 'the dead don't go anywhere. They remain among us, spoken of as if still alive, a vibrant part of every living family.'

MacLean makes clear at the start of *Geography of Heaven* that he is no churchgoer: 'Not agnostic, not ungodly, not indifferent – not anything really.' During a Vipassana retreat in the Himalayas, he confronts the cold reality of his wife's death: 'All that we love will be lost.' Later, having taken ayahuasca in the Peruvian Amazon, he has a vision of hell that is filled not with infernal tortures but with absolute nothingness. 'No soul, no heaven, no Katrin. I despaired of it, and of the lack of response to my call.'

However, this is not the end of the journey. Throughout the book, MacLean meets various guides, gurus and fellow seekers. One of them describes the author's grief as 'the beginning of the sacred' in him. Another reminds him of Dante and the old Christian concept that the love of a human being can be a stepping stone towards love of the divine. MacLean insists that he was not searching for God but simply trying to find out what happened to his departed wife. Nonetheless, reaching the end of this inspiring journey through love and loss, he concludes that 'she awoke in me a vision to share life beyond life'.

BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

An increasingly repellent figure: Henry VIII in later life, portrayed by Hans Holbein the Younger

A colossal failure

David Crane

Overlord: The Life and Reign of Henry VIII
by Steven Veerapen
Birlinn, £30, pp. 503

There can be virtually no aspect of Henry VIII's life and reign, as Steven Veerapen puts it, that has not been 'scrutinised under every available lens'. There have, of course, been any number of histories and biographies of Henry himself, and as many again of his wives and ministers to go alongside the films, plays and novels that, from Shakespeare to Hilary Mantel and (best of the lot) C.J. Sansom, show no signs of drying up.

So 'why bother writing about Henry VIII?' Veerapen asks – and he'll not be the only one wondering that. He is happy to concede that this is probably an exhausted seam from a narrowly English perspective, but what of other perspectives? What of Henry's immediate neighbours, targets of the imperial pretensions suggested by this book's title? 'Henry's life was not merely an English one,' Veerapen insists,

Nor was his story an English story. His shadow fell heavily across every corner of the British Isles and his reign – and his developing regal identity – involved persistent attempts to assert and entrench English authority in Wales, Ireland and, most doggedly, in the holdout kingdom north of the border. Henry was by modern standards an ardent English nationalist, but he was not an isolationist; rather he was an aggressive expansionist.

Henrician claims to an 'overlordship' smack as much of bombast and pique as of any settled imperial policy

That was not how he saw it, of course. Scottish suzerainty, Arthurian legend, ludicrous foundation myths, the historic independence of the English church – he could believe anything when it suited; but whether this is the 'groundbreaking' key to the reign is more questionable. There were obviously good military reasons for fearing both Scotland and Ireland, but these ebbed and flowed with the continental tides, and Henrician claims of an 'overlordship' smack as much of bombast, pique and competitive vanity as they do of any settled imperial policy.

In a sense, though, this is an idle argument, because for all the academic sparring and some engaging new additions to the usual cast, the focus of this book is inevitably England, and the dramas of Henry's court. A reader might come away wondering if there was anyone in 16th-century Ireland other than a handful of FitzGeralds and Butlers, and anyone at all in Wales; but here in spades is the Tudor England of the popular imagination – a world of tournaments, rituals and display, of dynastic insecurities, terror, Tower Hill and Smithfield fires with, at its heart, the increasingly repellent figure of the ulcerated, 28st king.

'I come no more to make you laugh,' Shakespeare warned his Globe audience in 1613. 'Such noble scenes as draw the eye to flow, We now present,' and he was not joking. The marriage and early death of Prince Arthur; the fading hopes of a male heir; the 'great matter' of the King's divorce; the 'Calais swordsman'; the humiliation of Anne of Cleves; the short, sordid life of Catherine Howard; the rise and fall of Thomas Cromwell – it might be a familiar story, but Veerapen proves that it is one that never loses its power to shock. It is one, too, that he tells with terrific verve, with all the confidence of a man who knows his sources. There might be times when the historical novelist in him gets the upper hand, but if his Anne Boleyn has 'skin in the game', and his characters 'sweat' and 'rasp' and 'thunder' and 'bark', it seems a small price to pay for his flare and unfailing – often hyperbolic – energy.

He is not just a good storyteller, either, because *Overlord* also brings us face to face with that law of unintended consequences that is the hallmark of a reign that changed the political and religious landscape of Britain for good. By almost any measure – not least his own – Henry was a failure, with consequences that would echo down the centuries. And here, in full fig, he is, the dazzling hope of his nation who left it more bitterly divided than he found it; the Renaissance prince who, to the horror of Europe, would murder Thomas More and John Fisher; the defender of the faith who would break with Rome; the dynast whose dynasty would barely outlast the century; the medieval tyrant whose use of the law and parliament to do his killing would come back within three generations to bring a royal successor to the block.

It is the final irony of a life that is full of them. A Scottish king on the English throne beheaded by a second Cromwell. Could there be a more perfect footnote to a reign that changed Britain in ways that the young Prince Henry could never have dreamed of or planned?

GETTY IMAGES

Party town for boomers – The Villages, Florida, for the 'active retired', where sex parties and STDs are said to be at a record high

New designs for living

Helen Barrett

How to Build a City: Journeys in the Urban Future
by Gabriella Bennett
Headline, £25, pp. 336

Can architecture solve urban crises? Or should architects and planners concentrate on mitigating the consequences of wider events (climate change, war, demographic and economic shifts), then hope for the best? What happens when we have no choice but to build or rebuild cities?

In her new book, Gabriella Bennett, a journalist interested in architecture and urban landscapes, spends two years flying around the world looking for answers to these and other questions. Woven through her adventures are two personal quests: to reckon with her unhappy adolescence in the Scottish postwar new town of Glenrothes; and to reset her life after a pandemic-era health crisis that led her to quit her job. It makes for an ambitious and engaging investigation, even if she is at times breathless about the projects she encounters.

Her journey is epic. In Arctic Sweden, she explores Kiruna, a mining town whose centre must shift to a new location as the extracted ground subsides beneath its inhabitants. In Ukraine, she visits architecture students plotting and recording buildings lost to bombing in Kharkiv, and residents rehoused by charities outside Kyiv. In Vienna, she tours KalYpso, an apartment block created by a feminist collective, so design-conscious the residents took two years to decide on chairs for their common room; and, in Tokyo, she meets an urbanite whose apartment is so dinky he uses a miniature vacuum cleaner. ('Cleaning hardly takes any time at all. Tidying is different.'). In Texas, she joins space fanatics watching rocket test launches from Starbase, aka 'Mars-a-Lago', Elon Musk's remote, mono-industry city in the Rio Grande valley.

One of Bennett's strengths is her eye for thrilling, dramatic and counterintuitive stories. She visits 11 destinations, and each project tackles a different problem, including loneliness. In Florida's The Villages, the fastest-growing 'age-segregated community' for the over-55s in the US and a kind of party town for boomers, Bennett finds tales of sex parties and STDs at a record high. 'You can take it or leave it, but that's simply how it is,' she deadpans.

In an apartment block created by a feminist collective, it took two years to decide on chairs for the common room

Sometimes the story becomes Manichaean. There are goodies (indigenous people, artisans, architects with boutique practices and niche projects involving seaweed) and baddies (20th-century Scottish town planners, mining corporations, Foster+Partners). Bennett was a lonely teenager in Glenrothes, so she decides that 20th-century modernists got it all wrong. But she never knew the town's modernist housing – she and her family lived in a farmhouse – and she doesn't ask anyone who grew up in new-town Glenrothes how they experienced the place.

In Ukraine, she is impressed by an architect who shows her plans for a social housing project for the war-wounded. 'I love it,' she exclaims, though it has yet to be built. She may be right in these judgments, but she tends not to put her criticisms to her villains, nor difficult questions to the people she admires. While she does talk to some who live with her chosen architects' work, those people have few serious complaints. But they can't all be happy.

And occasionally her emotional involvement undermines her rigour. The closure of the Rothes Colliery, around which Glenrothes grew, was not 'the worst PR disaster the National Coal Board had ever known'. That was, by some distance, Aberfan.

Elsewhere, the writing is superb. Bennett has a gift for atmospheric language and crystalline description, and she controls what could quickly become a sprawling and overly dense topic with excellent pacing (though there is a smattering of archi-jargon borrowed from Thomas Heatherwick – 'humanising', 'soulfulness' – mercurial words that sound delightful but are undefined). She stays on the right side of confessional writing: there is just enough of her personal story to engage without distracting from the vital stuff. She treats elements of city living that tend to concern women, such as eating out alone and manoeuvring prams, with as much importance as anything else. It is heartening to read reports from the far reaches of the world from

a writer who was clearly unmoored by the pandemic but is now back covering ground with a sense of purpose.

Early on in the book, I worried that Bennett had put a lot of time and work into what might amount to a travelogue of architects' vanity projects. But *How to Build a City* is not that at all. There is something of John Grindrod's wry architectural odysseys, or even of Ian Nairn at his most lyrical in her writing. It is a serious and spirited attempt to find answers to problems that elude many architects and planners; to show us what is possible; and, perhaps, to demand from them the best that cities can be – whatever uncontrollable events may be heading our way.

The thrill of the chase

Annie Walton Doyle

The Runner
by Scarlett Thomas
Scribner, £16.99, pp. 288

Billed as a literary thriller from one of the masters of the genre, Scarlett Thomas's *The Runner* is a far denser philosophical novel than readers might expect – albeit one built around a propulsive chase. The author transforms ultramarathons into a metaphor for modern capitalism, using the story of a fugitive runner to question what gives life value in a world dominated by money, surveillance and relentless growth.

Capitalism is presented as a race without a finishing line, with running symbolising an economic system that demands endless progression: 'The whole world is just relentlessly upupup. Why is everything just another hill?' While adopting the language of hustle culture, Thomas draws attention to the slippery nature of infinite growth: 'Once you've started to lose, it is difficult to stop.' The fallacy of deferred gratification is also called into question: if you have to 'earn the good stuff by doing the hard stuff first', then achievement itself is a form of punishment.

Alongside the running-as-capitalism metaphor, Thomas focuses on the relationship between money and value. Hard cash is the plot's driving force, with the protagonist Jay on the run from assassins chasing a Bitcoin bounty. But our attention is continually drawn to the nebulous nature of cost: 'Most of what people sell doesn't really exist... stocks, shares, bonds.' Financial systems feel detached from reality: 'Most of how the world works is what you don't see.'

Aside from money, then, *The Runner*'s cast of fringe-dwellers are looking for what gives life value, with religion often surfacing as a viable option. To some, Christianity coexists perfectly with capitalism, citing the parable of the talents as evidence that 'you're supposed to come out of this life with more than you came in with'. But Ellie, Jay's enigmatic love interest, sees money as entirely antithetical to being good, while Jay himself has a fancy to 'become a Catholic priest and be done with all this'.

Surrealism further unsettles what first appears to be a grounded literary thriller. Mythological figures, exorcisms and Jay's persistent uncertainty ('Does he believe in God? If not, then life exists in a void. If so, then he is damned') sit comfortably alongside cryptocurrency, ultramarathons and business theory. Economics, like faith, is a system of 'ghosts', sustained by belief in invisible forces, where value depends on collective acts of imagination.

Although its dense philosophical digressions occasionally threaten to weigh down the narrative, *The Runner* successfully transforms an exhilarating chase into an examination of meaning under the 'free-wheeling chaos of late capitalism'. Thomas refuses simple answers about money, morality or fulfilment. Instead, she leaves the reader with the unsettling possibility that the pursuit of value is itself what gives life value, which may be the novel's most compelling insight.

Directed by Adrian Tinniswood — best-selling author of *The Long Weekend* and Britain's leading historian of the country house — this programme enables you to pursue original research in this field on the topic of your choice.

Research projects can range in time from from the Tudors to the twentieth century, and can focus on any theme in the country house's history, architecture, use or management.

One-to-one guidance in research is complemented by a brilliant series of ten evening seminars, meeting in the historic surroundings of a Pall Mall club — each with discussion and dinner with the visiting speaker.

Those wishing to attend the seminars and dinners, but without taking the degree, can join as Associates (at a reduced fee).

For further information, or to speak with Adrian Tinniswood about your proposal, scan the code or email:

HPG@buckingham.ac.uk

THE UNIVERSITY OF BUCKINGHAM
GRADUATE PROGRAMMES IN LONDON

Theft – or a gift to the world?

Travis Elborough

Days of Miracle and Wonder: Paul Simon and the Trials and Triumphs of Graceland
by Ashley Kahn
White Rabbit, £23, pp. 320

'The story of *Graceland*'s origins,' writes Ashley Kahn in his deep dive into Paul Simon's multi-million-selling album, 'is the story of a cassette: a bootleg tape.' Entitled *Accordion Jive Hits, Volume II*, and containing a collection of decade-old Mbaqanga songs from the townships of black South Africa, it had been lent to Simon in 1984 by the Norwegian multi-instrumentalist Heidi Berg. She had come to know the musician through his friend and neighbour, Lorne Michaels, the creator of *Saturday Night Live*, and Simon had offered to produce her. She explained she needed the tape back, as it belonged to someone else, but that this was essentially what she had in mind for her next record – though there were many obstacles to working with musicians in apartheid-era South Africa.

Just four years earlier, the United Nations General Assembly had passed Resolution 35/206, requesting 'all states to prevent all cultural, academic, sporting and other exchanges with South Africa', and urging 'writers, artists, musicians and other personalities' to boycott the country. This boycott had the backing of the outlawed opposition party, the African National Congress, whose leader, Nelson Mandela, languished in prison on Robben Island. Many prominent western musicians, including Bruce Springsteen and Bono, made their support public, rallying together under the banner 'Artists Against Apartheid' and releasing the charity single, *Sun City*. It was a kind of musical rebuke to Queen and Rod Stewart for playing that majority-white holiday resort in the neighbouring 'homeland' of Bophuthatswana.

In the event, Berg would never get the tape back. Simon clung on to it for dear life, listening to it incessantly on the three-hour drives he was making between his apartment in New York City and a beach house under construction at Montauk, Long Island. That property had been intended as a dream home for himself and his new bride, Carrie Fisher, but after less than a year their marriage was already disintegrating. Simon's album *Hearts and Bones* had been a commercial flop, ending an almost unbroken run of hits since the mid-1960s when his and Art Garfunkel's folk-rock duo had first topped the charts with 'The Sound of Silence'. Now, with MTV, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Van Halen and Prince (and Walkmans and mix-tapes) in their pomp, Simon, aged 43, was at a loss about where to go next.

Kahn wryly observes that Berg would be far from the last person in the whole saga of *Graceland* to cry 'Stop thief!' when, in addition to half-inching the tape itself, Simon promptly went off and made a record in South Africa. Accusations of appropriation of one kind or another dogged the album from the day of its release in late August 1986. Even its title song came in for criticism in referencing the Memphis mansion of Elvis Presley, the white singer whose debt to African-American music was never settled to everyone's satisfaction. Given that the record's cover image, a 15th-century Ethiopian Coptic Christian representation of St George, was sourced from a museum in Salem, Massachusetts, perhaps a witch hunt was to be expected.

Kahn mounts an impassioned defence, earnestly charting the album's collaborative, open-hearted composition and highlighting the positive after-effect it and the follow-up ensemble live shows had, for example, on the career of Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Kahn witnessed firsthand the subsequent global success of this Zulu a cappella group when he acted as their tour manager on dates in the US, Europe and Japan in 1988. He quotes the trumpeter Hugh Masekela, living in exile in London at that time, whom Simon consulted before travelling to Johannesburg. Instead of discouraging the singer, he applauded him for putting 'the music into the ears of people who would otherwise never bother about South Africa'.

Accusations of appropriation of one kind or another dogged the album from the moment of its release

Illustrating just how thorny the issue was, Masekela's sister, Barbara, in her role as head of the ANC's Department of Arts and Crafts, working in Lusaka, Zambia, would find herself having to draft an official statement rebuking Simon, and by implication her own brother, for the 'inadequacy' of his anti-apartheid messaging. It was a charge levelled by some reviewers at the record itself, which, if spawning the chart smashes 'The Boy in the Bubble' and 'You Can Call Me Al', lacked anything as finger-pointing as the near contemporary 'Biko' by Peter Gabriel or 'Free Nelson Mandela' by the Special AKA.

Still, Kahn notes, Malcolm McLaren suffered nothing like the same level of opprobrium when, just three years earlier, the former Sex Pistols' Svengali-turned-solo artist put out *Duck Rock*. That album was, like Simon's, partially recorded in South Africa and made liberal use of Mbaqanga musicians without crediting them. When the matter was raised in the British music press, McLaren fronted it out, wearing the theft as a badge of artistic provocation, stating that England was 'the land of piracy'.

By contrast, Simon, Kahn maintains, went out of his way to ensure everyone received their due and more, paying the South African musicians triple the local rates for recording sessions. Kahn argues that Simon, having published his first song as a teenager, knew only too well the value of writing credits. Nevertheless, the Mexican-American band Los Lobos, who played on the album's closer, 'Around the World or the Myth of Fingerprints', continue to insist that Simon robbed them blind. Kahn cites Simon's method of piecing together songs from mere fragments of different recordings and manipulating in digital post-production as the mitigating factor here. There was no song until he and the engineer Roy Halee put it all together, goes the reasoning. The seemingly unflappable Halee emerges as nothing less than the hero of the piece. He helped steer the whole rapidly sprawling project, as recording roamed across three continents and guest turns came in from everyone from Phil Everly, Adrian Belew and Linda Ronstadt to Youssou N'Dour and Rockin' Dopsie.

The 1980s were nothing if not about excess; and the effort and vast sums of money spent on recording and then promoting the album were suitably period. There is also something almost quaint about reading 40-year-old arguments about musical thievery when OpenAI, a company with a certain white South African among its original founders, has more recently ransacked the whole of recorded history without a second thought.

Armchair critiques

David Edmonds

Immanuel Kant
by Robert Wicks
Reaktion, £12.99, pp. 190

If the only story you've heard about Immanuel Kant's life is that it was so regular that the citizens of Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) would set their watch by his daily walk, then this book has much to teach you.

In fact the provenance of this oft repeated anecdote is an essay by the German poet Heinrich Heine, who, far from being an eyewitness, had never even met Kant: 'Everything had its set time, and the neighbours knew that it was exactly half past three when Immanuel Kant, in his grey frock coat, rattan cane in hand, emerged from his front door.'

The Kant that emerges from these pages is less dull and more recognisably human than his metronomic image. He played billiards, gambled and socialised with the great and good of Königsberg. He was ambitious and status-conscious. His interests extended way beyond philosophy, narrowly defined.

BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Kant's interests extended beyond philosophy to geography, anthropology and seismology

He wrote about geography and anthropology, and after the devastating Lisbon earthquake of 1755 published three essays on the causes of earthquakes, now regarded as important contributions to early seismology.

Still, unfortunately for a biographer, it was hardly a life of picaresque adventure. Kant never strayed far from Königsberg and spent his entire career writing and teaching – mostly at the university. He was raised in a strict Lutheran household. More specifically – and Robert Wicks makes much of this – the family was from the Pietist reform movement, which emphasised Bible study and the prioritising of conscience over action. Kant always maintained that his philosophical framework was consistent with faith. Over the years he produced many books, some of the best-known in his fifties and sixties. His masterpiece, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), in which he set out to describe the limits of human reason and to interrogate what we can know and what lies beyond knowledge, appeared when he was 57.

Outside work, his life was uneventful. There was a bit of female interest, but he remained a bachelor, a fact possibly connected to his attitude to the institution of marriage:

> This is the age of the rule of women, but with little honour, because they degrade the man in his worth. They first make him vain, yielding and foolish, and after they have deprived him of the dignity of male honour, they have no obstacle. In all marriages, women rule…

Kant's misogyny is eclipsed by his racism, which has been the focus of much recent scholarly attention, though he's too embedded in the canon ever to be cancelled. In his works of moral philosophy, including *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), he made the case that humans differed from other animals in being rational and possessing moral autonomy. All humans are worthy of respect and should be treated as ends in themselves. They should never be used merely as means to an end. These are ideas that have helped underpin today's conception of universal human rights. Odd, then, that we find in Kant statements such as: 'Humanity has its highest degree of perfection in the white race. The yellow Indians have a somewhat lesser talent. The Negroes are much lower; and lowest of all is part of the American races.'

There's no shortage of anti-Semitism, too: 'The great majority of [Jews] have earned the not unfounded reputation of being cheaters, due to their spirit of usury.' Plus: 'Jews lie and deceive without it troubling their conscience.'

Wicks makes a spirited case for his subject. He points out that this tension between theory and practice (aka hypocrisy) was hardly new. Kant was writing as the founders of the Constitution of the United States were declaring that all men are created equal in a society in which slavery was widely practised. As for the anti-Semitism, Kant 'found the supposed permission to lie stated in the Judaic scriptures to be morally intolerable, and accordingly condemned the Jews as a group'. He took lying extremely seriously. Notoriously, he thought one should even tell the truth to a murderer who asked for the whereabouts of his would-be victim. Even if Kant was guilty of ignorance, Wicks argues, his views were grounded in what he regarded as facts. They weren't an irrational extrapolation from a dislike of any particular individual. Indeed, he had Jewish pals, such as the philosopher and theologian Moses Mendelssohn. Think of this as the some of my best friends…' defence.

Kant thought one should even tell the truth to a murderer, if asked about the whereabouts of his would-be victim

This book is a pleasant enough stroll through Kant's life, his key ideas and his legacy. Although it comes in at only 190 pages, it could have been shorter still, for there are unnecessary digressions. As for Kant's daily walk, it seems to have been part of a carefully planned fitness regime. And it paid off. He died at the ripe age of 79. By this time, he was celebrated across Europe, and Kantian memorabilia was in demand. Shortly after his death, his 30-year-old sleeping cap was flogged off for a high price.

Bad blood

Michael Arditti

Where Are the Kings
by Donal Ryan
Doubleday, £16.99, pp. 224

A typical adolescent, Jack Fristensky is consumed by uncertainty about who he is, his place in the world and, of course, his burgeoning sexuality. Less typically, he must also contend with his mother's suicide and his father's subsequent admission to a mental hospital. Effectively orphaned, he is sent to live with his mother's 'mad, mysterious family' – his grandparents, Aunt Rose and three uncles, Theo, Haulie and JJ, the last of whom is only two years his senior.

All the characters are richly and idiosyncratically drawn. But whereas, in previous novels, from his earliest, *The Spinning Heart*, to the most recent, *Heart, Be at Peace*, the award-winning Irish author Donal Ryan has specialised in multiple viewpoints, here his third-person narrative exclusively inhabits Jack's consciousness. The writing, particularly in the early childhood section, recalls James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.*

Jack feels forever at the mercy of forces beyond his control. In his parents' house, he is aware of significant conversations that 'he couldn't quite catch from the living room', and of 'nights of muffled shouts and cries from down the hall', which, in retrospect, may offer clues to his mother's distress. In his grandparents' house, where the mysteries proliferate, 'he's like an old transistor with a broken dial that tunes itself by accident now and again to the right wavelength'.

The deepest mysteries predate his birth. What lies behind the 'bad blood' that existed between his uncles and his father? Is it simply, as a censorious aunt maintains, that the Slovakian Tomas was 'a bad spirit' who 'came along and nabbed our perfect Grace', or is there something darker, something that anticipates the 'incestuous lust' that Jack himself comes to feel for Rose?

Ryan offers a vivid and engaging account of Jack's life in the bustling rural household: his admiration for his two middle-aged uncles, whose relentless bickering belies their mutual devotion; his fractious relationship with the truculent JJ, who jealously interrupts his first kiss with the German Leyla, 'a proper teenage girl with blonde hair and beautiful moopsies'.

The family portrait, however, proves more compelling than Jack's climactic epiphany, in which he abruptly appears to unravel the complex web of past relationships before descending into a madness reminiscent of his father's. Rather than a questioning protagonist, whose confusions we share, he becomes a psychotic one, whose conclusions we distrust.

ARTS

The write stuff

Ysenda Maxtone Graham celebrates the dying art of postcard-sending

In its campaign to preserve traditional British screen-free pleasures, English Heritage is promoting a variety of wholesome pastimes this summer, such as puppet shows and fairground and circus skills. Children will lap those up; but will they respond equally enthusiastically to English Heritage's new initiative for 2026: to revive the habit of holiday-postcard writing?

This is the vision: that their young visitors, inspired to verbal exuberance by the castle, stately home or ancient ruin they're enjoying, will snap up a couple of the new limited-edition postcards specially commissioned by English Heritage from the artists Nick Sharratt and Quentin Blake, and (ideally in the café) will write to their grandparents, aunts, uncles and godparents.

It's an attractive vision: children of the 21st century staring into the middle distance, chewing their Biro, forced for a few minutes to think of other, older people and try to imagine what they might like to read. It was an empathetic skill we all learned in the 20th century, when a morning of every holiday was spent 'doing your postcards'.

'All things worthwhile in life require a little bit of effort,' says Matt Thompson, the conservation, curatorial and learning director promoting this venture. It's 'the physicality of postcards', he says, that make them superior to round-robin social media boasts, 'the smell, the feel of them' – as well as the pleasure they bring to the recipient, touched that the sender has taken the time and trouble to write personally to them, by hand.

The longstanding postcard firm Judges (established 1902), which is printing the cards, tells me that postcards used to represent 70 per cent of their turnover, but it's now down to 5 per cent; most of its business is now printing images on mugs, tea towels, key rings and fridge magnets. It longs to reverse the downward trend.

I wish I could say that the images on the three new limited-edition postcards were worthy of this noble vision. Of the three commissioned images (one is by Blake, and two by Sharratt, illustrator of the Jacqueline Wilson books), the Blake is by far the best. Both artists were commissioned to create non-site-specific images that could be sold across all English Heritage sites. So they couldn't draw Dover Castle or Stonehenge. Blake's card depicts a mounted knight in armour galloping off from a multi-turreted castle, pennants fluttering against a few wispy watercolour clouds. There's a whiff of romance and history here, just enough to fire the imagination of a knight-loving child.

A morning of every holiday was spent 'doing your postcards' – it was an empathetic skill we all learned

Sharratt's, by contrast, are garish and characterless. One is of a twin-turreted keep with a damsel of colour in one turret and a knight in armour in the other, both of them children, both waving at us and grinning with smiles consisting of a 'u'-shaped line on their circular faces. The human figures are out of scale, far too big, reducing the turrets to toy-castle status. A cartoon dog grins in the foreground. The image is as shadeless, and the colours as basic, as something from an iPad colour-your-own starter kit. Sharratt's second card is of a non-specific stately home with three cartoon children in the foreground smiling at us – one of colour, one dark-haired and one red-haired, with a cartoon dachshund on a lead. Both Sharratt images include the English Heritage logo on a flag, a marketing component that Blake somehow managed to avoid.

I sometimes wonder whether it isn't the relentless cheerfulness of such images promoted to the younger generation that make them all so depressed. As they browse those cards, they might well feel that if they're not as ecstatically happy as the children in the pictures, they've somehow got life terribly wrong. Children have far more sensitivity, emotional depth and sheer taste than those images give them credit for. They don't need to be constantly assaulted with happiness. It's the opposite of infectious.

Among English Heritage's unsung treasures is a collection of 800 old postcards of Dover Castle, amassed over many decades by its former head custodian Pat Cunningham, and stored in the archives of Dover Castle. I went to have a look at them, and was reminded of the marvellous evocativeness of postcard images at their best, and of the centrality of postcard-sending in the 20th century. Often, they were sent intra-county: from Dover to Canterbury or Broadstairs, just 15 or 20 miles away. There's much to savour on both sides of the cards: changing visual tastes in the images, and changing social and domestic priorities in the words.

I'm pretty sure that the elder broth-

English Heritage's collection – which includes this one from 1971 – reminds us of the marvellous evocativeness of postcard images at their best

er, Harry, who in 1907 sent his little sister Queenie a postcard of Dover Castle, would not have been remotely tempted by the Sharratt 'happy-children' cards. The image he chose to impress his younger sister was of the 16th-century cannon known as 'Queen Elizabeth's Pocket Pistol'. In his brief message, he gets straight to the chief point of interest: 'My dear little Queenie, we saw the train come from London to the big boats and put the people on.'

It was transport and firearms all the way. That was the great thing about the great age of holiday-postcard buying. In your choice of card, both as a child and an adult, you showed off your tastes and interests to the recipient. You stood in front of the rotatable stand for ages, deciding which to go for: would it be the keep, Roman lighthouse, Norman church, Constable's Tower, armoury room, interior of church, staircase inside keep, cars parked on grassy verge, aerial view of the whole site, or a hovercraft with the castle in the background? I used to look down on people who couldn't decide and instead plumped for quadruple-image cards with the name of the place in the middle, perhaps along with the town's heraldic crest.

Postcard images developed across the century, from plain black-and-white to moody, floodlit castle against orange sunsets in the 1970s. The 800 cards, in plastic albums of transparent envelopes, are arranged pictorially rather than chronologically, so you get a delightfully unpredictable variety of words on the backs, from the Edwardian housewife instructing her servant to tell Nurse 'to collect the Baby Girl on Monday 28th September', to a boy describing a 'night hike' to his grandmother in the 1960s. A surprisingly large number of the postcards remain blank,

I used to look down on people who plumped for quadruple-image cards

suggesting a century's-worth of people buying them with good intentions, but never getting around to writing or sending them.

Anyone of a nosy disposition will devour the written messages, combing them for human interest and drama. This is often in vain. An innate characteristic of postcards was that, by not having envelopes, they were public property – readable by the postman or anyone who found one propped up on a shelf. So they've never been vehicles for secrets or any kind of lovey-doveyness. The nearest we get to emotion in the collection is in one from 23 July 1916: 'My darling Freddie, In memory of the sixth anniversary of our wedding day, hoping the next will be spent together. With fondest love from Stubby.' What was the story, three weeks after the first day of the Somme? We'll never know, and that card comes with no addressee.

The collection offers a feast of insights into two perennial British preoccupations: the weather, and ill health. About half the written cards mention the weather, sometimes with a small boast ('a lovely day') but more often with a downward cadence ('cricket soon stopped for rain'; 'sorry to say raining this morning but we must not give up hope'). A similar proportion mention illness, either at the writer's end ('I've been laid up with malaria for ten days'; 'Wendy has been ill with her teeth') or the recipient's ('I'm sorry to hear your leg is troubling you again'.) Occasionally you get two illnesses in one card: Gladys writes to her daughter in Margate, 'I am really sorry to hear about poor little Nellie', and 'How is poor old Spot?'

I was intrigued by the husband who sent his dirty clothes home for his wife to wash in 1931. 'Sorry I could not send them earlier and hope it does not give you two washing days.' (I bet it did – poor woman.) And I longed to know who 'Sister' was in this from Beatrice in the 1920s. 'I got Sister's books before I left: *The House of Prayer* and *Everyman's Book of Saints*.' Was 'Sister' a sibling, a nurse, or a nun?

Longborough's Hansel and Gretel is a dark jewel of a staging

Classical music

Close encounters

Richard Bratby

Three Choirs Festival: Songs of the Sea
Gloucester Cathedral

Hansel and Gretel
Longborough Festival Opera, until 8 August

Die Fledermaus
Opera Holland Park, until 8 August

The Three Choirs Festival always feels so nourishing, so eternally English, that you sometimes forget how much history has been made there. It was in Gloucester in 1910 that the young Herbert Howells and Ivor Gurney heard the world première of Vaughan Williams's *Tallis Fantasia* while Elgar, in rented digs, tried out his Violin Concerto with Fritz Kreisler. Three years later you've got Sibelius despatching Aino Ackte to première *Luonnotar*, and Saint-Saëns, at 77, playing Mozart by day, then cracking out his celebrated musical impersonations at the post-show party. Apparently his Cosima Wagner was quite the knockout.

The point is that there have been moments when the musical universe pivoted around this quiet cathedral close. The 2026 festival wasn't quite as epic but what it did offer – as always – was ambitious, locally rooted music-making on the most generous scale. Tuesday evening's concert had a maritime theme, so Martyn Brabbins conducted the Philharmonia in Mendelssohn's *The Hebrides* and Elgar's *Sea Pictures*. Instead of the usual contralto, the soloist was Roderick Williams, whose baritone might have been lost beneath the surface of the orchestration if he hadn't been so eagerly attentive to the articulation and colour of the words.

In between came a choral anthem, *Never Weather-Beaten Sail*, by the Victorian church composer Charles Wood and later, a setting of Psalm 107 by Gloucester Cathedral's former organist Herbert Sumsion, who grew up in Elgar's world and died in the summer of Britpop. There's tradition for you, and his anthem – like Wood's – moved with the measured dignity and glowing harmonies that we call Elgarian because we've lost any other frame of reference. It was fascinating to hear that context restored, and it was a nice idea to follow Wood and Sumsion with Cecilia McDowall's *Ave maris stella*. Premièred in 2001 in Portsmouth, McDowall's motet combined vigorous choral and string writing with a restless, luminous sense of the sea.

More inspired still was the decision to entrust these works to the Festival's Youth Choir. They're not a huge group – just 50 or so singers, aged between 14 and 25 – but they delivered focused, shining sweetness at the top of their range and a splendid vigour and precision further down, carrying effortlessly over the orchestra even in the final item, Stanford's *Songs of the Fleet*. This was the piece that drew me to the concert: five settings of Henry Newbolt, written in the dying months of the Edwardian era. With their shanty-like choruses and imagery of dreadnought battle squadrons, they're a snapshot of British culture at a very particular moment – a potent mixture of sunset melancholy and chin-up defiance.

People dismiss Stanford as a dry old stick, but can you picture any living composer of comparable eminence even touching a subject like that? Imagine Adès writing a choral

MATTHEW WILLIAMS-ELLIS

society banger about the Royal Navy's frigate shortage. Coming after the Elgar in the first half, and briskly conducted by Brabbins, *Songs of the Fleet* also underlined the gulf between national-level talent and enduring genius. But if the Three Choirs Festival's 298-year run proves anything, it's that you can't have the one without the other.

Also in Gloucestershire, Longborough Festival Opera is ending its season with *Hansel and Gretel* (sung in English): operatic methadone for Wagnerites who are still struggling to come down from the high of last month's LFO *Tristan*. The orchestra is almost as fine, and the conductor Karen Kamensek finds endless subtleties in Humperdinck's score. There are gruff, peaty basses and a *Siegfried*-like ecstasy of tenderness as the children wake up in the forest.

With Lee Bisset as Mother (and the Witch) and Darren Jeffery as Father there are some glorious sounds on stage too, where Hansel (Joanna Harries) and Gretel (Rosalind Dobson) are a pair of sooty, fractious brats in a monochrome dreamscape. Lucy Bailey's production, meanwhile, rifles through the macabre subconscious of Central European folklore, from *Struwwelpeter* to Jan Svankmajer. The result is lucid but multilayered; fantastic enough for adults but cruel enough for children, and filled with visuals (a rain of ashes, a monstrous red tongue) that can be as disturbing or as playful as your imagination permits. A dark jewel of a staging, and tickets are still available.

The fundamentals are also sound in Liam Steel's new production of *Die Fledermaus* for Opera Holland Park. The English translation is witty, and the action has been updated to London in the Roaring Twenties. There's a dashingly sung Eisenstein (Thomas Atkins), a sensuous-sounding Rosalinde (Alison Langer), a feline Orlofsky (Clare Presland) and a Frosch (Robert Burt) who actually knows when to stop. I wanted to love it, I really did; but the orchestra under George Jackson had the snap and sparkle of warm lettuce. It dragged and dragged. Let's blame it on the heatwave; because in most other respects this *Fledermaus* has a lot going for it.

Pop

Dream on

Michael Hann

Flaming Lips; Black Country, New Road
Somerset House

It would be difficult to do certain shows in the courtyard of Somerset House. One can't really host anything too confrontational in a Georgian quadrangle: the clash of surroundings and sound would be too jarring. So instead the annual Summer Series tends to gravitate towards the feelgood or the inspiring, which is perfectly fine. However, if you go to more than one of the shows, it can feel as though you are watching some variant of the same performance.

Flaming Lips and Black Country, New Road are very different bands at a surface level. The former – a psychedelic band formed in the early 1980s in Oklahoma City who, somehow, after nearly 20 years, catapulted to success at the end of the 1990s – come from outside the pop industry. The latter started a little before the pandemic and were hailed from the very start, though they have become a rather different band now. What both have in common, though, is a gauziness – a dreaminess that seems largely unconnected to the real world.

Flaming Lips, playing two sets, took the approach that more is more, as they always do. Their stage was festooned with inflatables – balloons, beach balls – with costumes and digital screens: a feast for those who enjoy hallucinogens. BCNR didn't bother with the fripperies, simply offering musicians on a bare stage. But at both there was a strong element of what the musician Will Sheff of the band Okkervil River once described to me as 'the court music of the ruling class': indie music.

The Lips became popular at a very different time – in a culture broadly suffused with optimism. That was reflected in much American alternative music back then, with scores of bands (many, like the Lips, produced by Dave Fridmann) writing music that appeared to suggest that any adversity was a minor hurdle; that all that remained in life was to dream. Collectively, they were like a musical Francis Fukuyama; and their end of history was music that only looked in on itself.

Projecting Wayne Coyne's lyrics on to screens didn't help, because he is simply not a very good lyricist. The words are fine as part of the noise, but presented as written text, they are doggerel: 'Every time a dragonfly flies by, it's you', 'If you could watch everybody work while you just lay on your back/ Would you do it?' After a while it was as though someone were flashing up lines from a picture book for little kids – the kind with the Important Messages about being nice to everyone.

When they first appeared, BCNR sounded like a southern, middle-class version of the Fall playing some sort of hybrid country music. Their original singer departed after one album, and the strange apocalyptic element disappeared. Instead of one man, three women now share the vocals, with a marked softening effect. What intrigued me was that I was with a friend who loves this kind of music – gentle, folkish, melodic – so much so he puts on shows and releases records by not dissimilar bands, and he was bristling at it. He felt the way I did a couple of nights later at the Lips: all very pleasant, but dear God, the world is burning under a desert sun, and this is the best you've got?

Collectively, they were like a musical Francis Fukuyama

It's of course wildly unfair to blame pop singers for not having much to say about the world, especially when what they have to say is usually so forgettable. Meaningless platitudes are, however, preferable to Graham Nash telling us about the plight of the whales: 'It's a shame you had to die/ To put the shadow on our eye'. But both these shows felt like opiates rather than stimulants, right down to BCNR opening with a cover of Wings's 'Band on the Run', Paul McCartney being probably pop's most notable purveyor of 'don't worry it'll all be fine' music.

Art always exists in a context. And I'm not sure the context of this benighted summer really suited either of these bands. Both are fine groups, and I've enjoyed them before, but both summon only one mood in me. Usually it's a benevolent but not overwhelming admiration. In the oven of the London heat, it was mild irritation.

Holy Days is not so much a road trip as an ego trip for Miriam Margolyes

Cinema

Idiot wind

Damian Thompson

Holy Days
12A, Nationwide, from 14 August

Why are filmmakers so interested in nuns? They've been exploring the subject for more than a century, which might seem odd, given that real-life dramas in convents are mostly confined to quarrels about the washing-up. But celluloid nuns are a different matter.

As early as 1922, in the Swedish silent movie *Häxen*, a nun reaches for a spiked leather belt before leading her sisters in a demonic dance. That's the beginning of one stereotype, the nun as sadomasochistic hysteric, which reached its apogee in Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971). Meanwhile, films such as Powell and Pressburger's *Black Narcissus* (1947), set in a Himalayan convent, and *The Nun's Story* (1959), starring Audrey Hepburn as a missionary sister struggling with her vows, dealt more subtly with the theme of repressed sexuality.

At the other end of the spectrum of stereotypes are singing nuns, famously depicted in *Sister Act* (1992). But its main character Sister Mary Clarence – played by *The View*'s resident bore Whoopi Goldberg in those far-off days when she was mildly funny – is only disguised as a nun; she's actually a lounge singer on the run from the mob. In contrast, Debbie Reynolds's Sister Ann in *The Singing Nun* (1966) is modelled on the Belgian Sister Luc Gabriel, whose hit single 'Dominique' outsold Elvis Presley. (Understandably there was no sequel telling the story of the singing nun after she left her convent: she died in an apparent suicide pact with her female lover.)

The plot is so full of absurdities that I lost interest and played my favourite game of spotting clerical solecisms

Holy Days is a comedy about three elderly nuns who embark on a road trip through New Zealand with a little boy who is helping them save their convent from demolition. It's dimly aware of the complex genealogy of nun films. Infected by a spirit of geriatric mischief, the nuns jive to pop music, *Sister Act*-style. Judy Davis, who plays the Mother Superior Sister Agnes, hides her emotional fragility behind a veneer of bossiness – a genuflection to Meryl Streep in *Doubt* (2008), but rendered pointless by the feeble script.

The plot of *Holy Days* is so full of absurdities that I lost interest and played my favourite game of spotting clerical solecisms. Why were both the Catholic parish

priest and his bishop sporting Anglican cassocks? Why did Sister Agnes address the bishop as ‘Your Excellency’ when the style in New Zealand is ‘Your Lordship’, and then promote him to archbishop by calling him ‘Your Grace’? And, an unrelated question, why does yet another movie set in the 1970s resort to long-haired wigs borrowed from a Debenhams mannequin?

The biggest mystery, however, is why Miriam Margolyes agreed to play the role of Sister Luke, who spends most of her time stuffing her face before her teeth fall out. Margolyes used to be an actor with virtuoso comic skills. Then she turned herself into a bargain-basement national treasure by regaling Graham Norton with anecdotes about breaking wind. In the end, *Holy Days* isn’t so much a road trip as an ego trip for this annoying woman. I took one look at Sister Luke and thought: I bet she farts by the end of the film. I won my bet.

Radio and podcasts

Troubled waters

Daisy Dunn

Thames Unfiltered
Apple, Spotify and other platforms

Church Going, with Giles Fraser
BBC Radio 4

Perhaps the greatest honour ever paid to Queen Victoria was to have a sewage-pumping engine named after her. Both she and Albert – and the future Edward VII, plus Alexandra – had the delight of becoming bywords for the mighty machines constructed by Joseph Bazalgette to lift waste from the depths of his (literally) ground-breaking London sewer system.

Listening to *Thames Unfiltered*, a new six-part podcast from the *Evening Standard*, I was amused to learn that the trend now favours the Greek gods. Among the eight barges constructed to serve the Tideway Tunnel sewer, completed last year, are a Zeus, a Poseidon, an Apollo, a Phoebe and, er, a Churchill. What else to give those who have everything?

Bazalgette was only 29 when he was appointed assistant surveyor to the Metropolitan Commission of Sewers. But he wasn’t entrusted with solving London’s sewage problem until the outbreak of the Great Stink a decade later in 1858. An unusually hot summer had exacerbated the already odious smells, which Charles Dickens described as ‘of a most head-and-stomach-distending nature’. Vast quantities of lime were poured into the river and over-curtains hung at the Houses of Parliament in a vain attempt to neutralise the stench.

The podcast’s presenter, business journalist and author Lucy Tobin, asks whether the Thames is returning to the same state. Certainly not, says a seventh-generation waterman: the demolition of riverside factories has made a big difference, and one doesn’t necessarily have to have one’s stomach pumped these days after falling in. But it’s a low bar.

Curiously, the podcast is co-hosted by Thames Water, a fact that raises the eyebrows of more than one contributor. The company is currently facing debts of £20 billion. Is this the best use of its resources? The candour of its spokesmen, at least, is to its credit. Yes, we discharge sewage into the river, says one, but as little as we can at times of heavy rainfall – and we’ll tell you all about it.

At one point in the series, Tobin logs in to Thames Water’s near-real-time map and finds that there’s been a discharge into Winterbourne Stream between 3 a.m. and 5.15 p.m. – that’s a 14-hour dump. The main things I took away from the podcast are that Thames Water isn’t the only company doing this; it’s trying to do it less; the health of the river varies throughout its length; and the Tideway Tunnel has prevented 8,000-Olympic swimming pools’ worth of filth from being emptied into the water. For many, nevertheless, the tunnel is little more than a sticking-plaster.

Tobin says ‘poo’ a lot; one almost admires the relish with which she pronounces it each time. This may prove too much for some, but if you don’t mind the ickiness, the episodes on Bazalgette’s engineering are particularly good. As Tobin visits his Abbey Mills (‘Poo Palace’) and compares it to a church, you may well find yourself wondering, for the first time in your life, whether sewers may be closer to Heaven than Hell.

The Revd Canon Dr Giles Fraser is concerned about real churches in his three-part series for Radio 4. ‘It feels like my life’s work being flushed away,’ laments the Church of England priest,who has been charting diminishing congregations for years on a spreadsheet. Although numbers at his parish of St Anne’s in Kew have been steadily growing, and notwithstanding the much-discussed uptick in attendance among 18- to 24-year-olds, the national trend has been following a downward trajectory for some time.

You may well find yourself wondering whether sewers may be closer to Heaven than Hell

The questions posed by Philip Larkin in ‘Church Going’, the poem that lends its name to this series, are as pertinent now as they were in 1954. ‘When churches fall completely out of use,’ asked Larkin, ‘what shall we turn them into?’ Sir Simon Jenkins suggests that they should be handed back to the community if empty. ‘Give them to the local council?’ asks Fraser, whose heart sinks at the prospect of a church becoming a ‘bijou residence’ – ‘They can’t fix holes in the road!’

It isn’t all doom and gloom. Fraser – an affable host – has conversations with people about the growth of pentecostal churches and the ‘full-fat’ Gospel’, and about ‘church planting’, which roughly translates as starting new churches or finding ways to reach people from existing ones. There are also efforts to understand the historical preconditions of the decline.

The Revd Canon Professor William Whyte, of Oxford, describes the over-building of the 19th century, when representatives of different denominations competed to build more and bigger churches. The result was that many places ended up with four or five places of worship. That many of these churches would have been half-empty even to begin with is certainly food for thought.

Theatre

Oh, what a circus

Lloyd Evans

Brainiac Live!
Garrick Theatre, until 30 August

The Importance of Being Oscar
Park200, until 22 August

Brainiac Live! is a ‘family science’ show based on a popular Sky TV programme. It’s ideal for children under 12 and for mums and dads who want an hour-long break from their normal parenting duties. The show is performed by a trio of lab-coated ‘brainiacs’, Ed, Ned and Raz, whose antics centre around loud bangs, naked flames, puffs of smoke and the destruction of props.

The fun kicks off with a helmeted Ned preparing to dive into a sheet of cling film stretched across an empty doorframe. He runs. He leaps. He plunges through the transparent barrier which rips apart as he crash-lands on to a discarded mattress. Is that science? Not really. It’s a low-level stunt performed in conditions of extreme safety. Ned repeats the experiment by leaping into a rectangular wobbleboard which duly disintegrates on impact. Finally, he throws himself at a sheet of rubber netting which pings him back to his starting point.

The next experiment begins with Brainiac Ed stripping down to a female swimming costume and performing a bump-and-grind routine. This seems a little inappropriate for schoolkids but perhaps they’re used to watching adult erotica during Drag Queen Story Hour. And the show contains far more knob gags than is strictly necessary.

For the three performers, this gig is a dream come true. They can improvise new lines if they lose their way in the script. And any mishap on stage becomes an opportunity to fool around and spark off extra excitement and chaos. The more damage they create, the more applause they get. No attempt is made to introduce the kids to the basics of chemistry by, for example, mentioning the periodic table or explaining the difference between a compound and an element. The goal is to stimulate curiosity rather than to share the rudiments of learning.

A few scientists are name-checked, including the actress Hedy Lamarr, whose work as a physicist helped to improve the performance of radio-guided torpedoes during the second world war. The performers gloss over her expertise in missile technology, which probably resulted in the loss of life, and instead they salute her contribution to the field of global positioning systems. The world’s greatest living scientist, Elon Musk, doesn’t merit a citation.

The highlight of the show is an office stunt popular with bored yuppies at merchant banks. Brainiac Ned straps himself into a swivel chair and grips a fire extinguisher in his hands to provide thrust. By releasing the fire extinguisher, he sends himself spinning in rapid circles for several minutes. He repeats the prank with two big sky rockets added to the propulsion unit. The rockets are lit, the gunpowder ignites and Ned twirls around like a Catherine wheel sending out plumes of fire and smoke. When he brings the chair to a halt, he stands up dizzily and collapses in a heap. Again, no scientific principles or lessons are alluded to.

This is an enjoyable circus show masquerading as a learning opportunity. The bangs are extremely loud so prepare to stick your fingers in your ears. You might be better off entrusting your children to the care of Granny and Grandpa. If they’re deaf already, they won’t notice the damage done to their eardrums.

The Importance of Being Oscar is a one-man show written by Micheal Mac Liammoir and first presented in Dublin in 1960. Mac Liammoir was an Irish actor, born in London, who wanted to restore Wilde’s good name. The script is brilliantly performed by Alistair Whatley who stands on a dark stage accompanied by two hoops of pure white light. Angels’ halos, perhaps. The show delivers a thorough end-to-end biography of Wilde including many lesser-known details. In his youth, he wrote tasteful but erotically charged poetry to the actress Lily Langtry, whom he appears to have courted sincerely.

His later conviction and imprisonment were disasters that he might have easily avoided. He let himself become entangled in a long-standing family feud between his lover Bosie and Bosie’s erratic and violent father, the Marquess of Queensbury. At his trial, he treated the court like a West End theatre and improvised quips that won laughter from the gallery. Had he copied Nicola Sturgeon’s tactics and given dull, uninformative replies he might have saved his skin.

The goal is to stimulate curiosity rather than share a rudiment of learning

The passages from the trial prove how shockable the Victorians affected to be, at least in public. The lawyers shrank from using a word like ‘homosexuality’ and relied on euphemisms such as ‘unnatural’ or ‘impure love’. In that culture of evasion and secrecy, Wilde’s error was to declare his romantic nature in public and to expect that his talent and celebrity would protect him from censure. He wanted to be ‘out and proud’, as we say today. But he chose the wrong part of the wrong century to make his protest.

© 2025 SKY STUDIOS LIMITED/SKY ITALIA S.R.L./CATTLEYA S.R.L./MARCO GHIDELLI

Television

The Italian job

James Delingpole

Gomorrah: The Origins
Sky Atlantic/Now

You’re not going to like this and it pains me to say so but *Gomorrah: The Origins* is not in the same league as *Gomorrah*. The wardrobe is more stylish, the characters are more approachable, the dialogue is more expensive, the locations are more attractive, the plotting is more comprehensible, and the mise-en-scène is lusher, more cinematic and less spare. But in the context of the original, these qualities aren’t so much a virtue as a capitulation.

Gomorrah (or *Gomorra – La Serie*, as it was in Italian, so one can never remember whether or not to include the ‘h’) ran on Sky Atlantic for five seasons from 2014 to 2021. This was a period where Anglo-American TV had long since begun its inexorable decline into glib, shallow and predictable diversity-cast wokedom. But *Gomorrah* felt more like a throwback to the grit, integrity and authenticity of the *Get Carter* era because it was made by hicks in Italy who weren’t yet aware of the new rules.

It was based on books by the Italian journalist Roberto Saviano about the bru-

Marc Bolan-esque gangster Angelo (Francesco Pellegrino), centre, in Gomorrah: The Origins

tal 1990s clan wars to control the cocaine and heroin trade in his home city of Naples, where the local Mafia are known as the Camorra. Though he sold millions of books, Saviano bitterly regrets having written them because he is now forced to live a reclusive life under constant threat of assassination.

What the TV adaptation captured very well was the squalor, remorselessness and implacability of this grey-washed netherworld where even multimillionaire clan chiefs are forced to live like trapped rats and where the lives of foot soldiers are as fleeting as those of subalterns on the Somme. It was the drama 'where characters die before they become characters', as one critic perfectly put it. You never knew which person you'd got to almost like was going to get it next, which made it a very nervy viewing experience.

But the discomfort was worth it because – at least till it went slightly off towards season five – you felt as though you were watching the Real Thing: uncompromising, painfully bleak but echt. And the characters were great, such as Genny Savastano, the flashy, overweight rich kid dispatched by his ruthless gang boss dad, Pietro, to South America to learn the trade. Imprisoned by drug lords, the spoilt youth is told he will never be released until he has chopped up his cell mate with a machete. Harsh but effective.

Gomorrah: The Origins is directed by the other main star of that series, Marco D'Amore (who played the simpatico killer-for-hire Ciro Di Marzio, aka L'immortale). It's set in the late 1970s and portrays the early life of Pietro Savastano and his journey up the Camorra hierarchy. Presumably Pietro is going to experience an awakening not dissimilar to that of his future son Genny because when we meet him he's just a goofy, amiable, shy but quietly charismatic 16-year-old kid with bum fluff on his upper lip and innocent dreams of marrying the out-of-his-league jeweller's daughter Imma (Tullia Venezia).

Because it's filmed with a bigger budget (in Italy, *Gomorrah* was as big as *Game of Thrones*, so it has a lot of goodwill to capitalise on) and presumably aimed at a broader market, *Origins* feels so sumptuous as to be almost chocolate-box by comparison. Sure, everyone's dirt-poor, but the vibe is *Oliver!* dirt-poor, where young Pietro (Luca Lubrano) and his fellow street urchins all have cherubic faces and feel as though they could burst into song at any moment. As indeed they do in the very first scene in which Pietro surprises us with his slinky 1970s funk moves.

I'm not convinced by the soundtrack. I miss the industrial bleakness of Mokadelic, who scored the original, and too many popular-international-hits-of-the-day intrude. Rod Stewart's 'Sailing', for example, which never ought to be included in a mafia drama, not even were it to be deployed as ironic counterpoint to a scene where a corpse were being dumped over the side of a yacht.

This, in turn, is a reflection of an even bigger problem: the show's determination to remind us at every turn that it's set in the 1970s – and wasn't the era groovy! On the plus side, we get to wallow in some epically 1970s styling, most enjoyably in the epicene fur-trimmed outfits sported by Marc Bolan-esque gangster Angelo (Francesco Pellegrino), with his curly shoulder-length locks and soulful eyes. But does all this perfumed poncery contribute much to the sense verisimilitude? I feel not.

One more irritation: the script is rather too keen on moody eternal verities and on grand contextualising exposition. For example, if they're at the docks waiting for a drugs shipment, one character will declare something like: 'This is the first consignment of heroin ever to reach our impoverished southern port city. It will transform the fortunes of those of us who have taken this risk!', while someone else cracks open a champagne bottle. In *Gomorrah*, they would have just grunted something in dialect and shot a dockworker in the head.

None of this means I'm not enjoying *Gomorrah: The Origins*, by the way. I'm halfway through episode four and loving the set-up for what looks like it might be a variant on the Red Wedding massacre in *Thrones*.

I like the acting, the characters, the look, the plot trajectory. But it's pitched at the masses, not at the cognoscenti.

Great art is priceless. Great writing is just £1 a week.

SINCE 1925 • THE INTERNATIONAL ART MAGAZINE • JULY/AUGUST 2026 • £7.95
APOLLO
U.S.A
Once upon a time in America
A CUBIST LAMP POST IN PRAGUE
THE MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY AT 20
DOES SCULPTURE HAVE A FUTURE?

Apollo magazine. Know your art from your elbow.

apollo-magazine.com/Spec26

NOTES ON...

Crazy golf

By *William Atkinson*

It is a great family disappointment that I could never get into golf. My late grandfather would become so engrossed watching the Masters that he used to light one cigarette off the other. But it was always unfathomable to me. Attempts to play at school were less a good walk spoiled and more a Friday afternoon wasted. Yet my antipathy has a glorious exception: there are few things in life I enjoy more than a round of crazy golf.

For years I have toured the nation's courses, putting past plastic dinosaurs and animatronic windmills, Slush Puppy and scorecard in hand. 'Proper' golf is difficult. Crazy golf reduces it to the essentials: hole, putter and Newtonian physics, the odd stegosaurus notwithstanding. Whereas traditional golf seems stuffy, crazy golf is relaxed and accessible – as silly a sport as one can play without becoming one of those real-life Quidditch nutters.

Miniature golf (the 'crazy' refers to the version incorporating unusual obstacles on the course) was a great British invention. The Victorian Scots loved golf, but ladies were not allowed to play properly since swinging a club above their shoulders was too unseemly for the fairer sex. Putting, however, was fine, so a course was laid out at St Andrews in 1867. It's called the Himalayas and can still be played today.

The windmills were still a long way off. The first miniature golf course we might recognise was built in 1916 by James Barber, a steamship magnate. Flower beds lined the edges; a fountain featured in one of the holes. Surveying his new arena, Barber declared: 'This'll do.' This became 'Thistle Dhu', the course's name. He set a trend. Obstacle golf tournaments were soon being staged across America. By 1930, New York alone had 150 rooftop courses. But when the Great Depression hit, mini golf seemed far too frivolous, and the sport's popularity plummeted.

Fortunately, enterprising Swedes and Germans had by then brought it over to Europe. The game would only revive in popularity in America once Joseph and Robert Taylor, two New York brothers, had the canny idea to incorporate landscaping and windmills. Dinosaurs wouldn't be added until the 1990s after the success of *Jurassic Park*.

In Britain, crazy golf is more popular than ever. Hastings hosts a tournament each June, while companies such as Swingers, Junkyard Golf and Puttshack have transformed it into a funky social activity, combining courses with cocktail bars and street food. Crazy golf is the perfect date: an opportunity to impress a lady with your sporting prowess with minimal physical effort. To put this theory to the test, I resolved to take a female companion to the Puttshack in the City. I couldn't find a date at midday on a Thursday, so I instead took a married mother of one I found hanging around Bank station. What we found, after a glass of wine, was dystopian.

Puttshack has ruined the world's simplest sport: digital courses with automatic ball-tracking, a point system based on completing silly extra tasks and a terrible All-Bar-One aesthetic. Somehow, the company has reintroduced the pointless complexity of traditional golf in the tackiest way possible. A windmill doesn't need a computer screen. We played our nine holes and got out. James Barber, where are you now?

SPEECH WRITING

Great Speech Writing

SPEECH LOOMING?

RELAX, WE'LL WRITE IT FOR YOU!

Weddings.
Eulogies.
After dinner.
Keynote. TED.
Call Lawrence & team.

0207 118 1600
www.greatspeechwriting.com

FINE FOOD

FORMAN & FIELD

Award winning

ARTISAN BRITISH FOOD, DELIVERED TO YOUR DOOR

formanandfield.com
0203 601 5464

ANGLO of FRENCH
PROPERTIES

EXTRAORDINARY HOMES. EXCEPTIONAL HOLIDAYS.

Chateaux, Manoirs, Country Houses and Villas in South West France, Provence, the Côte d'Azur and Italy.

www.anglofrenchproperties.com
+44 (0)1258 817 110

Please Scan

CLASSIFIEDS

General

RUGS

RESTORATION
BY MASTER CRAFTSMEN

EXPERT PERSIAN & ORIENTAL RUG HAND CLEANING & RESTORATION
LEADING BRITAIN'S HANDMADE ORIENTAL RUG TRADITION FOR THREE GENERATIONS

JAMES BARCLAY
COLLECTION & DELIVERY THROUGHOUT THE UK • JAMESBARCLAY.CO.UK
SPEAK DIRECTLY WITH OUR SPECIALISTS 020 3174 2427

MOBILITY

"My stairlift has given me back my quality of life."
Miss Hall
Scan for more information:
Maintain your independence, let Acorn Stairlifts keep you safe to enjoy your freedom!
NEXT DAY INSTALL
• NEXT DAY installation available
• Stay in the home you love
• For straight & curved staircases
• FREE no-obligation survey and quote
• 365-day local service and support
FOR YOUR FREE BROCHURE & QUOTATION
CALL ACORN NOW ON FREEPHONE
0800 326 5738
ACORN STAIRLIFTS

FINE CLOTHING

WESKIT

MADE BY HAND IN LONDON

16 CROSS STREET, ABERGAVENNY NP7 5EW

07780 483 467 WWW.WESKIT.CO.UK

Advertise in *The Spectator* classified, email fsloan@mediaconcierge.co.uk or call 07971 086438

TRAVEL

TRAILFINDERS
THE TRAVEL EXPERTS

WHEREVER AND WHENEVER, TRUST TRAILFINDERS TO TAKE CARE OF YOU...

• AWARD-WINNING SERVICE
• INDEPENDENT TRUSTED TRAVEL ADVICE
• UNRIVALLED CARE & PROTECTION

Trustpilot
No.1 TOUR OPERATOR

WINNER
BEST TOUR OPERATOR
The Times & The Sunday Times
TRAVEL AWARDS 2025
for 12 consecutive years

SCAN HERE FOR OUR LATEST OFFERS

ALL YOUR TRAVEL ARRANGEMENTS TAKEN CARE OF IN ONE PLACE

Call TRAILFINDERS on 020 7938 0250,
or visit your local Trailfinders Travel Centre

IATA
ATOL LICENCE: 1458
caa.co.uk

Exclusive subscriber events

SPECTATOR CLUB

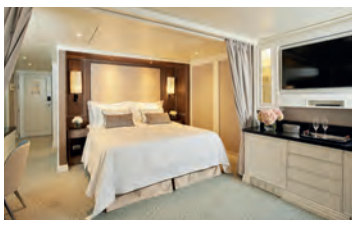
The Spectator's Mediterranean Cruise onboard Regent Seven Seas Grandeur®

13 JUNE 2027 | 7 NIGHTS ALL-INCLUSIVE
SUITE FROM £3,480 PER PERSON | £6,090 FOR SINGLE OCCUPANCY

The Spectator and award-winning luxury cruise specialists The Travel Academy are delighted to announce a new and exclusive trip for 2027. We invite you to join business editor Martin Vander Weyer, Real Life columnist Melissa Kite and a like-minded group of readers onboard one of the most luxurious ships ever built – Regent Seven Seas Grandeur® – for a Mediterranean cruise from Barcelona to Rome via Palamos, Cannes, Monte Carlo, Portofino and Tuscany (Livorno).

Regent Seven Seas Cruises® is the most all-inclusive luxury experience at sea, and we are delighted to share early bird prices, with savings of up to £3,500 per suite.

For more information visit **spectator.com/medcruise** or email **loyalty@thetravelacademy.co.uk**



The Lux Collection BY THE TRAVEL ACADEMY LTD

Many of your guests will have shrunk in size, due to being on fat jabs. This explains the room seeming curiously cavernous.
Dear Mary, p59

LIFE

Best life
Rachel Johnson

Lake Como

It doesn't take long for me to fall in love. A young Adonis with a six-pack bounced on a trampoline, his dark curls flapping like spaniels' ears. Waiters flitted about with drinks. Ridiculously attractive couples, all with perfect bodies, lounged on the beach in front of us, rosé on ice to hand.

We'd arrived by water, fetched by a barefoot beauty in an Albergo Aurora-branded white polo and batty riders, who helped our party of five out of our little launch and onto the Albergo's *riva* as if not only our lives depended on it, but her job too.

Something about Italy, everything about Lake Como, makes one feel a teeny bit classy, a bit Grace Kelly on the Corniche, even if it's only in those few seconds when one's stepping onto a creaky wooden *pontile* in greedy expectation of a serious lakeside lunch.

We crossed to the eastern shore and there it was. The latest object of my desire. A stone house on the water

There must be a word for it, a German word probably, which expresses that syndrome often experienced by serial enthusiasts with short attention spans like me. Within a day or so of meeting you're head over heels and, suddenly, the rest of your life makes perfect sense and at last you can see the road ahead.

But I wasn't thinking about divorcing Ivo for the young god on the trampoline. No, as I clamped my jaws around my second bruschetta, I was already planning the sale of our London house and moving to Lake Como. After lunch, I made Mr M show me by boat all the possible properties on the lake. 'This one you have 300 steps to the road,' he'd say, as I lusted after some terracotta treasure-house. 'Surely,' I said, 'people sell up when they can't manage all the steps?' 'Properties rarely come up,' he said, as we zoomed by *palazzi*, Renaissance villas and 18th-century masterpieces in terraced parklands. He told me that he'd once asked an old man who lived in a modest two-bed how much he wanted for it. The man had eyed the Inglese. 'Four million.' That was almost ten years ago. 'But I don't want anything grand,' I said unnecessarily, as if I could afford even a lock-up garage on the lake.

'Houses almost always stay within families, but I know something that might be for sale…' We crossed to the eastern shore, and there it was. The latest object of my desire. A stone house on the water. Four serious, black-shuttered windows gazed out at me as if to say, here I am. Pliny loved this place so much he bought several villas – what was stopping me from having one?

Then I started considering the downsides. Did I want to live in Italy when, let's face it, I couldn't live in Italy, thanks to the persuasive campaign to leave the EU championed ten years ago by my own brother, and Brexit constrained my sojourn in EU countries to 180 days a year?

By the time we moored up I had cycled through the next few years. I'd sell London to buy a fixer-upper on Lake Como… I'd be broke… I wouldn't make friends as I couldn't speak Italian. It would be like when Londoner Daisy Waugh moved to Bath only worse, I warned myself.

Out loud, I reassured my host. 'Don't worry, I can already see the headline on one of the very long features I'd doubtless write,' I said, 'Go *lago* and go home: how I moved to Como and it all went wrong'.

I know there's no fool like an old fool, but the good news is… I can fall out of love just as quickly.

A postscript on love, and loss. The news that Rod Liddle has died has cast a black cloud over the high summer of the fourth estate. He was a hero for everyone who loathes cant and fudge and loves brave, funny and razor-sharp writing.

He could make any subject intoxicating. He was a journalist of unmatched dash, had the biggest balls in the business and no subject was too delicate or dangerous for him to flay with his verbal scalpel. As well as being a compulsive writer, he was a wildly funny speaker and broadcaster, and had a sort of X-ray vision when it came to people. He knew the wrong 'uns and he was never shy of letting people know who they were.

I had the absolute privilege of working for Rod for a spell at the BBC when he was my editor at the *World Tonight*. He knew better than I did that I'd file a much finer report if he sent me off to stay in a yurt with an eco warrior named Shane than if I went to a press conference at the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, and he was the first to tell me, I'm afraid, that I needed to 'put more of myself into my reporting'.

So I blame Rod for everything that followed as a freelancer after I left the impartiality and impersonality and security of a staff job at the BBC. And, yes, everyone on the team was in love with him, male or female, in some way, too. He was like pure oxygen in our stuffy office where most reporters were delegated to make ten-minute packages on who cares for the carers, or fairground safety.

As well as a hero, he was a heroic leader, an Alcibiades of the BBC, with star quality and charisma oozing from every nicotine-stained pore.

I know Rod was 66 but, as Rimbaud said, those whom the gods love die young. The world of newspapers and *The Spectator* is a poorer, sadder, greyer place without him. No, the world is. He is irreplaceable.

Real life
Melissa Kite

The French socialist must have burst her bladder getting a litre of percolator coffee down her to stop the Dutch couple getting any, but she managed it. She was more than a socialist, actually. I think she was one of those continental communists.

'Why can't we all just 'ave what we need an' live in peace, uh?' she asked me at one point, with the obvious answer, 'Because you hate everyone and pilfer everything,' but I couldn't say that and I didn't want an argument with her because she was pretty feisty.

Pretending to be Irish for two weeks was wearing me out but I kept it up because I feared she would boil over if she found out

I was Crème anglaise. She pronounced on arrival that she detested the English for their appalling manners, so I made the strategic decision to let her assume we were locals as I dutifully trooped down to the village to get her and her husband croissants every morning, which no Irish woman running a B&B in West Cork would have done. Madame La Gauche railed about the English being uncouth while I waited on her hand and foot and she did all sorts of things herself that amounted to appalling manners.

Halfway through her stay, for example, a young Dutch couple arrived for the weekend and she became territorial about the breakfast buffet. She had drained that entire percolator of coffee by the time they came down for breakfast, and I didn't notice until they had finished their bagels.

'Oh no, let me make you some more,' I said, entering the breakfast room to find them sipping mint tea. The lad smiled and said not to worry.

The builder boyfriend swaggered into the breakfast room with far less tact and, with the French having gone upstairs to get ready for whatever joyless, famine-based, English-hating day trip she had planned, he began a conversation with the Dutch about what they thought of her.

'Eh?' he said, nodding to the empty table. The Dutch kids smiled nervously. 'You like madame?' The Dutch boy oiled out of answering, so the BB gave up and went to pull ragwort from the fields. When the French came back down, the Dutch were peeling themselves an orange, enjoying the peace of the sun-drenched breakfast room. But she marched into the adjoining drawing room to play the piano.

Bang bang bang went the half-wrong jazz chords and I did consider telling her to stop. But that would have provoked ten minutes of 'Ne pas jouer? Jouer? Ah! Jouer! Do not play-yuh!'

She was, of course, being impossibly awkward about every single word that I was not pronouncing precisely to her liking.

So I might have said '*Voulez-vous des fruits?*' 57 times every morning and unless I hit the word 'fwee' exactly as she wanted it, she would look at me and emit 'Ugh?' until, dying inside with the futility of it all, I just shouted: 'FRUIT! You want fruit?'

And she would say: 'Ah fwee! Bah yes-urr. I will 'ave some fru-it sank-yuu!' And I would be expected to ignore her 'fru-it' and 'sank' while grovelling about my 'fwee'.

How hard is it to learn that the word for *merci* isn't 'sank' it's 'thank' – th th th thank! God help a Crème anglaise if they got *merci* wrong, eh? We'd have to hear all about Joan of Arc.

Later that day, she declared she wanted to show me how to bake bread, the inference being that what I was putting out every morning wasn't good enough. She went to an organic shop to get 'good *farine* – 'ow you say? Flow-urrr?' and she made me perform as directed, then put this dough in the oven and when it came out not quite risen declared it *très bon*.

I agreed and stuffed a piece down my throat. 'Mmmmm! *Très bon*,' which made her frown because I hadn't said *bon* to her liking.

On their last evening, she said they would like to eat with us and when I said that would be lovely she didn't say anything else. 'Right, I'll get something in then,' and I trooped down to the village.

The lamb chops disappeared in one go down the husband, who looked as if he hadn't seen meat for decades. She produced two bottles of wine they guarded between them and a salad of nuts and berries. This was your classic socialist fodder, like a plate of screws and bolts, and the BB and I had to surreptitiously douse it in balsamic vinegar and oil to get it down us.

For her part, she doused her chops in cheap barbecue sauce, for she was horribly desirous of sugar, as those who try to be vegan often are.

The next morning, I set out a new jar of blackcurrant Bonne Maman and when I cleared the table after they'd left I found the jar empty. Whether eaten in a frenzy or spooned into Tupperware for the onward journey, I have no idea. Either way, her final act was a redistribution of jam.

To book the B&B, visit www.melissakite.org

Dolce Vita

Nicholas Farrell

Dante's Beach, Ravenna

I was on my way to buy a bougainvillea from the plant shop with my middle son, Giovanni Maria, 14. We were in the Land Rover Defender, windows down with 'Satisfaction' by the Rolling Stones on the stereo at very high 'hey, hey, hey!' volume. Each time the chorus arrived – 'I can't get no!/ Hey, hey, hey!/ That's what I say!' – we rapped our knuckles on the dashboard in time to the gunshot drumbeat of Charlie Watts. We drove past the parched fields by the sea that looked like they would catch fire if someone so much as uttered a word out of place.

The Stones are one of my very few favourite bands although I don't listen to anything they've done since 1974, as it lacks the raw beauty of their first decade. But I've got most of what they did before then on CD in the Defender, if need be. And it was 'Satisfaction' that got me hooked on them when I first heard it as a teenager, half a century ago when I was Giovanni Maria's age, at a burger joint on the King's Road with my mother.

She had gone to Bangor University in 1967 with Mick Jagger, Marianne Faithfull and the Beatles to meditate with the Maharishi under blankets. So she was pretty 'with it', as they used to say, though I had to pretend that I did not know her when she once asked me very loudly from the other side of the record department in Harrods: 'Nicky, who's Chuck Berry?'

But the question that occurred to me while Giovanni Maria and I drove noisily on towards our destination was this: if it is verboten for the white man to wear a Mexican sombrero at a fancy dress party, or a Sioux chief's feather headdress, on the grounds that it is cultural appropriation, then why has it been OK all these years for the Stones to appropriate – i.e. steal – the music of black America?

As an Englishman, is the only hat I am allowed to wear a bowler? In Italy?

For that is what they did. Hook, line and sinker. The greatest rock 'n' roll band in the world stole the blues from Muddy Waters, the rock from Chuck Berry and the roll from Bo Diddley. Jagger's singing voice is the voice of a black man from the cotton states of the Deep South. The only difference between the prancing jongleur and a black and white minstrel is that he does not black up his face. As Keith Richards once said: 'No Muddy, no Stones.'

When we got home, I asked AI: 'Why have the Rolling Stones not been cancelled for stealing black music?' It replied in its typical tiptoe way: 'The Rolling Stones have avoided being "cancelled" for playing blues and R&B because they historically credited original Black artists, championed them during segregation, and cultural norms viewed their work as homage rather than theft.'

That coy term 'cultural norms' – so dishonestly deployed by AI to avoid pointing the finger at actual human beings – presumably means those in charge of the cult called woke, formerly known as political correctness. Yet if I, a swarthy white man burnt brown by the Mediterranean sun, wear a sombrero to a party then that is theft from, rather than homage to, Mexico. Or so I understand it.

What about my black 'Comandante Che Guevara' beret that I wear around town in winter? Should I desist on the grounds that I am stealing Cuba? As an Englishman, is the only hat I am allowed to wear a bowler? In Italy?

So is what the Stones have done homage or theft? The answer, I suppose, is both. But there's another issue here. In 1957, Norman Mailer, sacred monster of the radical chic

left, wrote a much-discussed essay called ‘The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster’, in which he said that white men were afflicted by ‘psychic havoc’ as a result of the Holocaust and the atom bomb. He said that the only cure was for the white man to become the sexually fantastic black man on the edge of society who lived for the present and the pleasures of the body, who loved jazz and ‘the good orgasm’ and who was not afraid to be violent. ‘Put down your whiteness,’ he wrote, and adopt ‘the cool lifestyle of Negro hipsters’.

I myself tried this in the all-night subterranean shebeens of Hackney, near the Balls Pond Road where I lived in those days – a lone white male high as a kite on skunk, dancing until dawn to the down and dirty bass beat of roots reggae so powerful it vibrated the walls. It did not get me very far. But I was only mugged once. ‘Come on, man, hurry up and hand it over, I do this for a living,’ said the black man in a surprisingly gentle manner.

I was not the white negro. Merely the white wanker. But Jagger was its epitome.

Here is *le point*. Where once the left urged white people to become ‘white negroes’, nowadays it cancels them if they try. Tellingly, in 2022 Mailer’s publisher Random House, reportedly refused to publish a collection of his essays to mark the centenary of his birth after staff complained about the white negro one. The left has travelled, in my lifetime, from white negro to woke nazi.

The Turf

Charlie Brooks

When you drive up the hill past the Ridgeway from Ashbury, the sweeping Berkshire Downs open up in front of you. But before you enter the Valley of the Racehorse, you pass Ashdown House.

The 1st Earl of Craven built it in the 1660s for the ‘Winter Queen’, Charles I’s eldest sister, Elizabeth of Bohemia, but she died of pneumonia before she could move in. This tragic masterpiece is my metaphor for the two decades I spent in Lambourn.

The sun was shining on the grand Dutch-style hunting lodge last week as I re-trod the path I first took 45 years ago. Jamie Osborne now trains in the yard where Nick Gaselee mentored the King during his short race career, so it seems appropriate that Jamie is coaching amateur jockey and *Sunday Times* royal correspondent, Roya Nikkhah.

Roya’s alarm clock is set for four on the mornings she rides out. ‘How often is that?’

I ask, knowing how tough race-riding will be. ‘Well, that depends on whether PH is in town,’ she replies knowingly.

So it isn’t only the King who has his timetable buggered around by the ginger menace from Montecito.

The first insight the wider public got into the unusual partnership of this amateur jockey and the battle-hardened, outwardly brusque, wizened trainer was during an interview on Times Radio with Jane Garvey and Fi Glover. I laughed so much when I listened to it, I had to pull over the car.

On the basis that Roya was about to ride Epictetus at York and raise a huge amount of money for Macmillan Cancer Support, Jane and Fi were probably expecting a load of nicey-nicey, isn’t-she-so-wonderful platitudes from the trainer. But if they’d known that Osborne’s original critique of Roya’s riding was, ‘You need to stop looking like a sack of shit when you sit on a horse’, they might have been better prepared.

‘So is Roya being very modest… is she quite good at riding?’ Jane asked Jamie. ‘She’s proficient,’ he replied. ‘I thought it was going to be an uphill battle to get her there… She wouldn’t make a living as a jockey but thankfully she can write.’

‘I hope you’re nicer to your horses,’ Jane blustered before recovering with what she thought was a safe follow-up question. ‘Can the horse tell who’s in charge?’

‘We’re hoping the horse will be at York this Saturday,’ Jamie replied. I just wish I’d been a fly on the studio wall.

‘I’m not sure I’ve ever heard Jane and Fi lost for words, but unvarnished Jamie briefly stopped them in their tracks,’ Roya later reports. ‘They asked me if he was always so dour. “That was nothing,” I assured them. “Imagine him at 7 a.m.”’

Whether Epictetus or Roya were in charge is hard to say, but they had the race sewn up a furlong out. Never in doubt. She’s now aiming for a much tougher race: the gruelling, leg-burning, lung-searing Newmarket Town Plate on 22 August over approximately three miles – a double marathon for a flat race.

Osborne has already turned his ex-eventing champion daughter, Saffie, into the best female jockey in the world, so what does she think of her father’s tutelage? ‘I think he’s tougher on Roya than he was on me,’ says Saffie. ‘But it’s amazing to see how hard she’s worked, and we love having her around. She’s really part of the team. But you do need a thick skin to put up with Dad.’

Fitness is part of that hard work and is the first barrier to entry for any would-be jockey, whether they want to ride as an amateur or professional. ‘The fitness test was bloody brutal,’ Roya confirms. ‘Four-minute plank, lift half your body-weight, press-ups and pull-ups, exercise bike, then throw up.’

Probably no worse than riding a bike without a saddle, as recommended to Roya by the King. A trick I suspect that he got from his sister.

Osborne is a tough taskmaster: think Thomas Tuchel rather than Gareth Southgate. But if you look behind the scenes in every successful racing yard, you will find an ex-National Hunt jockey pulling the strings.

Jimmy McCarthy is that man in Osborne’s yard, and I suspect he is the one who puts his arm around Roya’s shoulder. ‘He’s my saint of Lambourn. When I tacked up the wrong horse he quietly took it off me and said, “If you ride that, you’ll end up in Wantage.”’

‘She’s proficient,’ says Osborne of his new pupil. ‘She wouldn’t make a living as a jockey. Thankfully she can write’

But if she has learnt anything from Osborne, it will be how to survive. He was the best National Hunt jockey of his generation, and he’s put the resilience required to bounce back from serious injuries into training Flat horses. And no matter what material he has to train, he is a man who can find needles in a haystack. He always has a plan.

‘How horrible are you to Roya?’ I ask the trainer after she has ridden out three lots and not broken sweat. ‘I suppose our language was pretty brutal in the 1980s and 1990s,’ Jamie concedes. ‘We’re much gentler now.’

That got an eye-roll from the pupil. ‘He can be a grumpy sod sometimes through that Silk Cut haze,’ she adds.

Roya may get verbally duffed up in the yard when she’s slow tacking up, and out on the gallops when her horse Hierarchy takes control, and Jamie is ‘quite terrifying’. But I suspect the whole experience is quite good therapy away from the soap opera of the royal family.

‘She is dedicated,’ Osborne concedes. And then he mumbles something that sounds like ‘quite impressive’, but I know there’s no point in asking him to say it louder. Compliments are soon obfuscated. ‘Have you seen her [racing] colours? They’re very royal.’

‘So have you been the making of Roya?’ I ask, shutting my notebook. ‘Certainly not,’ she answers before he can get a word in edgeways. Something tells me these two have been quite a match for each other.

Chess

Dvorkovich's endgame

Luke McShane

On 24 July 2026, Arkady Dvorkovich announced that he was voluntarily suspending his duties as president of Fide, the international federation. Dvorkovich is a former deputy prime minister of Russia, so when he was named in the EU's 21st sanctions package, there was little room for manoeuvre. Rather than let the sanctions paralyse the federation's operations, he stepped back 'with immediate effect', handing over to deputy president Viswanathan Anand, the five-time world champion.

This is not the first time Fide has found itself in this position. Dvorkovich's predecessor Kirsan Ilyumzhinov, former president of the Russian republic of Kalmykia, was added to the US Treasury Department sanctions list in 2015 (albeit removed in 2025), which led, in 2018, to the closure of Fide's Swiss bank accounts – the same year Dvorkovich was elected.

In any case, Fide will soon elect a new president; the next election is due to take place alongside the Olympiad in Samarkand late next month. Surprisingly, Ilyumzhinov announced his candidacy, and the Russian federation gave its support. But when the final trio of candidates was announced, Ilyumzhinov's name was absent.

The closest to a continuity candidate is Timur Turlov, the Kazakh billionaire founder of Freedom Holding, which has sponsored several major Fide events and was announced in April as a partner of Fide during 2026. Turlov had planned to run as Dvorkovich's deputy but will now run for president with Anand as his deputy.

Jan Henric Buettner, another presidential candidate, casts himself as 'a builder, not a manager of the status quo'. The internet entrepreneur, who co-founded the Freestyle Chess series of events, clashed with Fide last year after it placed contractual pressure on players not to compete in an event with a rival 'world championship' billing. Buettner called the move coercive, though fences were mended earlier this year with the launch of the first Fide Freestyle World Championship. His running mate is Englishman Malcolm Pein, who is the founder and chief executive of the charity Chess in Schools and Communities (CSC), and the organiser of the London Chess Classic.

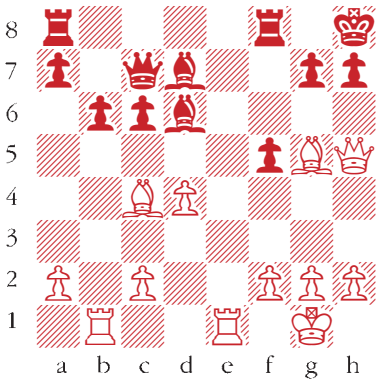
The third candidate, Wadim Rosenstein, is a German entrepreneur and chairman of WR Group, one of chess's biggest private sponsors. Rosenstein has positioned himself as a reform candidate, promising 'stronger leadership, professional governance' and a clearer vision for Fide's future, with Chinese businessman Gordon Tang as his running mate.

The latest event organised by the WR Group was a Rapid and Blitz match between Uzbekistan and the USA, held in Miami last month. USA won both rapid and blitz sections, with a 14-10 overall score. But the game below was an elegant win for Uzbekistan's soon-to-be world championship challenger, Sindarov.

Javokhir Sindarov (UZB) – Hikaru Nakamura (USA)
WR Chess Rapid & Blitz, Miami, July 2026

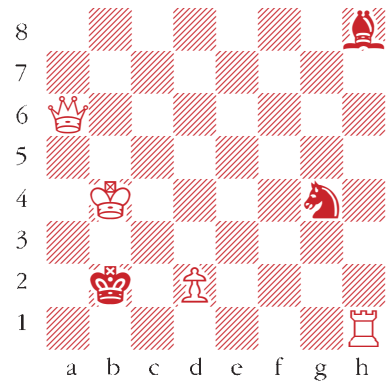
1 e4 e5 2 Nf3 Nf6 3 d4 Nxe4 4 Bd3 d5 5 Nxe5 Nd7 6 Nxd7 Bxd7 7 O-O Bd6 8 Nc3 Nxc3 9 bxc3 O-O 10 Qh5 f5 11 Rb1 b6 12 Re1 c6 13 c4 dxc4 A mistake, allowing White's pieces spring to life. 13...Qf6 was safer. **14 Bxc4+ Kh8 15 Bg5 Qc7** 15...Be8! was the last chance, but Black's position hangs by a thread. **16 Bf7!** The key idea. There is no good answer to the threat of Bf7-g6. **Bxh2+ 17 Kh1 Bf4 18 Re7 Rad8** 18...Bxg5 19 Qxg5 followed by Bf7-e6 wins. **19 Bf6! Qd6** Or 19...gxf6 20 Bg8! h6 21 Rh7+ Kxg8 22 Qg6# **20 Bg6 h6 21 Bxg7+ Kg8 22 Bh7+! Black resigns**

White to play, position after 15...Qd8-c7



PUZZLE NO. 911

White to play and mate in two moves. Composed by William Shinkman, the *Pittsburgh Gazette Times*, 1915. Email **chess@spectator.co.uk** with the first move only by Monday 10 August. There is a prize of a £20 John Lewis voucher for the first correct answer out of a hat. Please include a postal address and allow six weeks for prize delivery.



Last week's solution 1 Qg6!, e.g. 1...Ra2 2 Nb3#, or 1...Rb6 2 d4#, or 1...Rc2 2 Qg1#
Last week's winner Ilya Iyengar, Cambridge

Competition

Cringe benefits

Lucy Vickery

For Competition 3461 you were asked to submit toe-curling analogies. This invitation produced a stream of entries that were glorious in their banal, laboured, overwrought and tasteless awfulness. Bad writing, it turns out, has some high-brow admirers: the notoriously dreadful poet and novelist Amanda McKittrick Ross's fans included Aldous Huxley, C.S Lewis and Siegfried Sassoon, while Mark Twain pronounced her novel *Irene Iddesleigh* 'one of the greatest unintentionally humorous novels of all time'.

The offerings below earn their authors a £5 John Lewis voucher per analogy printed.

The noise he made, if expressed in writing, could be taken for the surname of a mildly dyslexic Polish plumber.
His face was the colour of the water in a tin bath that had just been used for the ablutions of nine grubby children on an autumn evening in 1887.
The ball went winging down the pitch like a flight of angels carrying the soul of a particularly pious nun directly to the bosom of Abraham.
He was about as energetic as a bookworm which had burrowed as far as page 327 of *Middlemarch* and had then been rendered comatose through a mixture of overeating and general depression.
Brian Murdoch

I was so tired that I felt as though I'd been knocked on the head, chopped up into small pieces, and rendered down into fat, bone meal and dog food – in a word, I was knackered.
She tucked into her plate of ice cream with all the gusto of an epicure during the Qing Dynasty scooping the brains out of a live monkey.
Brian Allgar

She tipped out the huge bag of cherries, and they piled up like Lords amendments to the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill.
The golf ball lay on the putting surface like the reverse image of a roundel of snot on a pristine white handkerchief.
Nicholas Hodgson

Derek wept, feeling that his hopes of love and happiness were as vain as a search for Donald Trump's superego.
His sense of the appropriate was such that he would have turned up in full fig as best man at a nudist wedding.
She gave me a contemptuous glare, as if I had vomited on her pet corgi while exposing myself.
Basil Ransome-Davies

The T-Rex devoured its meal like Julia Child consuming her first Dover sole with a crisp Pouilly-Fumé.
His heart thrilled at her beauty, like a nit on the first day of primary school sighting a full classroom.
He felt as smug as Shakespeare bequeathing his wife the second-best bed, knowing that the best had woodworm and this secret would seriously puzzle future scholars.
Janine Beacham

The aquarium was as blue as a chameleon would have been if the chameleon had been standing right in front of the aquarium.
She was as sad as a motherless kitten offered a dish of water when it had been expecting a strawberry daiquiri.
Max Gutmann

Sir Keir's speech landed with all the impact of a drunken Geordie's stomach contents splashing on to the pavement after ten pints and a curry.
After so long apart they fell into each other's arms and were like dog faeces caught in the intricate chevron grooves of an expensive training shoe: inseparable.
Joe Houlihan

Love them as she did, Fliss found it impossible to think of the twins as individuals, a problem she also experienced trying to single out a Cairngorm.
Elon boredly opened and closed blank Word documents like a capricious God gifting life to infants, only to extinguish it in a Victorian diphtheria epidemic immediately thereafter.
Adrian Fry

She woke up feeling as jubilantly full of poetry as Simon Armitage's briefcase on a bright spring morning when he was on his way to perform at a poetry festival.
George Simmers

As Spain prepared to lift the World Cup, the President lingered around like a toxic ex-boyfriend.
Death is just Nature's way of telling you that you need to slow down.
David Silverman

She poked her little tongue out flirtatiously, like her lover's glans peeping out of his underpants.
Gently, with the respect of a slaughterhouse director removing valuable glands from a carcass, he caressed her body.
Roger Rengold

The work of the committee was like slugs copulating: there was much frothing, no conclusion for a long time; and then more problems hatched out.
She approached social occasions like a nervous passenger, who curls her toes whenever the driver approaches a red traffic light.
He was laughing like a demon in Hell, who has just opened the suggestions box.
They were thrown together, then separated, like underpants in a washing machine.
Frank Upton

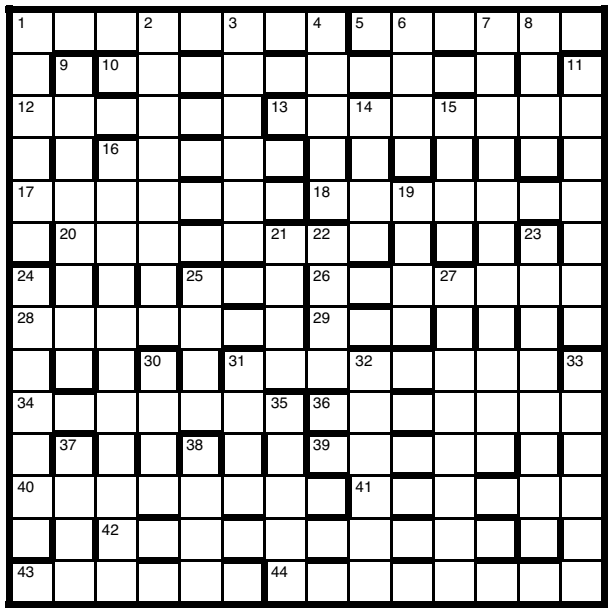
His gleaming teeth glistened like glazed iced buns on display in a baker's shop window.
As they embraced, she felt her heart beating like a blacksmith hammering an iron door-knocker into shape on his anvil.
Alan Millard

NO. 3464: ODS AGAINST

A modern man (or woman!) tries to get home after a decade away but obstacles keep presenting themselves and excuses are needed. You are invited to submit a passage or poem relating one such episode. Please email entries (max. 16 lines/150 words) to competition@spectator.co.uk by 19 August.

Crossword 2764: Placenames
by Doc

The unclued lights, all verifiable in a section in *Chambers*, are of a specific kind.



Across

5 Small tree, one a pretentious person brought back (6)
10 Aerial pond adapted for fish in an aquarium (5,5)
17 Takes back onto the staff latter half of Leicestershire Cooks (7)
18 Renault changed gear (7)
20 Evidence of Fall in the Rockies? (8)
25 Stiff paper, way-out neckwear? (3)
28 TV cook Harriott from NE Islay (7)
29 Note: 50 per cent reduced, after setback (3)
31 Is it found down the Strand? (8)
34 Blade – posh one – at NZ springs city (7)
36 Temporary bar opening (7)
40 Bananas by bottomless pit and fruit container (8)
41 Family members' new compositions not requiring piano (6)
42 Moeen's caught me out and wins silver (4,6)
43 Salmon, by the way, for fellow presenter (2-4)
44 The least bad runners? (8)

Down

1 Swiss city cut cattle fodder (6)
2 Lender is out at hockey rink markings (3,5)
3 Such decrees are timeless outbursts (6)
4 Socialist in Tyneside, turning up at village on the Lleyn (5)
6 Expert from Folkestone, reading (4)
7 Royals dabbling with green source of power (5,6)
9 Drink pub served up is for bawdy writer (8)
11 Bowling during series creates storm in Sri Lanka (7)
14 e.g. Vance – outside on record (4)
15 Pity it has only four chapters (4)
16 Needle patterns represented in chitchats (11)
19 State of posh topper turned up (4)
21 Actresses Evelyn or Dilys in *Cinderella*? Yes! (4)
23 Shabby party clothes with news boss (3-5)
25 Confused impression of old car firm city (4)
27 Rubber prone to distort? Renew after stripping (8)
31 Safe section of 31A reported (4)
32 Small fish hum (6)
33 Fits in well with text service (6)
37 Let us discuss our openings for game (4)
38 Resistance units – I see thousands (4)

A first prize of a £30 John Lewis voucher and two runners-up prizes of £20 vouchers for the first correct solutions opened on Monday 24 August. Please scan or photograph entries and email them (including the crossword number in the subject field) to **crosswords@spectator.co.uk**, or post to: Crossword 2764, The Spectator, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP. Please allow six weeks for prize delivery.

Name .....

Address .....

.....

.....

.....

Email .....

2761: ALPHABETICAL JIGSAW

First prize Michael Pigden, Barnet, Herts
Runners-up R.J. McGowan, Sutton Coldfield; Christopher Elengorn, Enfield, Middlesex

THE VINTAGE CHEF | OLIVIA POTTS

Grasshopper pie

Grasshopper pie is an unlikely dish: bright green, mint-flavoured, combined with obscure liqueurs and set with marshmallows, all sitting in an Oreo crust. It feels like the fever dream of a sweet-toothed teenager who's been let loose on their parents' drinks cabinet, and will regret it tomorrow.

The pie is based on the cocktail of the same name, which combines equal parts crème de menthe, crème de cacao blanc and cream. It's a heady mix of mint, white chocolate, dairy and alcohol. The cocktail hails from New Orleans and its origin is claimed by Tujague's in the French Quarter, where it was supposedly invented by the owner, Philip Guchet, in 1918. It tastes exactly as you'd imagine and is, forgive me, far better suited

It feels like the fever dream of a sweet-toothed teenager who's been let loose on their parents' drinks cabinet

to a pie filling than it is to a drinks party. The creamy, boozy froth is transformed into a smooth, balanced, no-bake filling. It became a popular pie in the 1950s, when chiffon no-bake pies were all the rage. But this filling is particularly clever. Instead of using the meringue and gelatine typical of a chiffon-style pie, the setting agent here is marshmallows. These marshmallows are melted down in milk before being whisked into double cream, along with the various types of liqueur that flavour the pie. The result is soft, fluffy and set with only the slightest wobble.

What is almost as unlikely as the pie itself is that it was one of the first things I ever cooked. I don't remember how I came across this curious, extremely American pie, but I do know I was living in a flatshare in London with two other girls, one of whom loved mint chocolate. So, I set about making it for her birthday. It was deeply inauthentic.

Oreos weren't as easy to come by then in the UK, so, from what I remember, I would have used bourbon biscuits, which lack the dark cocoa intensity of the Oreo, and that particular, nostalgic vanilla flavouring. I cannot believe I made it with proper booze (if I had, the remnants of those bottles would surely still be sitting at the back of my cupboard, so rare is the call for either of them), so it was likely flavoured with peppermint extract, adding a touch of mouthwash to the proceedings. When it came to the green food colouring, I channelled Kermit. It was vivid. It is fair to say that it lacked subtlety in almost every conceivable way. And then, just as I'd finished my work of art, someone knocked into it, denting it irrevocably.

It sat on top of our microwave, in all its dented glory, for days. It was extremely well received by the flatmate, but that might have been kindness on her part, as it was a synthetically flavoured, radioactive mint monstrosity. My memories of it are not favourable: toothpastey, overly sweet and garish.

Returning to this pie many years later, and making it properly, I couldn't believe just how good it can be. The flavour of mint the liqueur provides is nothing like the waft that hits you as the bottle opens: alongside the crème de cacao and marshmallow cream, it's softer, mellower and light. The crust is buttery, salty, crumbly and the perfect dark, intense foil to the whimsical sweet filling. The texture is remarkable: using marshmallows is such a clever hack to achieve a texture that tastes as if you've used a terribly complicated culinary technique.

You can skip the food colouring, but the shade of green from the crème de menthe alone will be far paler than from a bottle. Part of the joy of making a pie with a name as silly as this one is ensuring that its appearance is as daft as its flavour. You don't need to go as fluorescent as I did in my first attempt – adding a smear of green gel food colouring will give a softer, sherbetty green (just go slowly to avoid it looking like promotional material for *Wicked*).

Despite the boozy contents, the assembly is child's play. The base comes together in a matter of moments, and then is satisfyingly like moulding wet sand. The filling is easy too, but make sure you don't overwhip the cream before or after adding the melted marshmallow, as this can cause it to split. The finished mixture should just about hold its own weight, so it piles up in the crust, sloping down towards the edges. It will likely feel too loose, but those magical marshmallows, along with a decent spell in the fridge, will give you a perfectly sliceable texture.

Serves: 8
Hands-on time: 15 minutes (plus chilling)
Cooking time: 5 minutes

For the crust
– 65g salted butter
– 300g Oreo cookies

For the filling
– 200g marshmallows
– 150ml whole milk
– 60ml crème de cacao blanc
– 60ml crème de menthe
– 400ml double cream
– Green food colouring

1. Melt the butter. Blitz the cookies in a food processor, and then add the melted butter, pulsing the mixture until it begins to come together. Reserve 2 tablespoons of the crumb, then press the rest into a 9in tart tin. Compress the crumb with the back of a spoon, and push it into the sides to create a rim of cookie crust. Leave to refrigerate for at least two hours.
2. Place the marshmallows and milk in a pan over a low heat, stirring until the marshmallows have completely melted. Add in the crème de cacao blanc and the crème de menthe and set aside to cool for ten minutes.
3. Place the double cream in a large bowl or the base of a stand mixer and add a little green food colouring – exactly how much will depend on the type of food colouring, and how vivid you want the pie to turn out. Whisk until the cream sits in soft peaks. Add the marshmallow mixture and briefly whisk to combine.
4. Spoon the mixture into the centre of the tart tin, piling it up in the middle. Refrigerate overnight.
5. Just before serving, sprinkle the remaining biscuit crumb over the top of the pie. Remove from the tin carefully, and serve in slices.

JOY FOX

Drink

Airport brews

Declan Lyons

Walking through Gatwick airport recently, it was heartening to see so many bleary-eyed travellers enjoying a pre-flight drink in the terminal's Wetherspoons. Few organisations can be said to have done more for the nation's morale, or more specifically to ease the pain of those with a long journey ahead, than Spoons.

That jolly scene, played out in airports across the country, is now under threat from Michael O'Leary. Due to the increase in disruptive passengers, the Ryanair chief executive, who loves to play the stage baddie, wants to ban airport pubs and bars serving drinks in the early morning and to restrict all sales to a two-drink maximum. 'I fail to understand why anybody in airport bars is serving people at five or six o'clock in the morning. Who needs to be drinking beer at that time?' he is quoted as saying.

Why seek to punish those capable of enjoying a bracing pre-noon drink who can also then get onto a plane in a civilised manner?

If it is no longer possible to buy a pint before 10.30 a.m., we need to find a better – and perhaps more socially acceptable – morning drink. I have written here before about the magnificence of a Corpse Reviver No 2 for strengthening the soul early in the day, and *The Spectator*'s drinks editor, Jonathan Ray, recently revealed he favours a glass of ice-cold fino sherry. But there are other options.

There is a bottle of Leffe, which a Dundonian priest friend of mine used to describe as his ideal 'breakfast beer', possibly because of its abbey heritage. That clearly won't pass the O'Leary test and it doesn't pack the short, sharp punch needed in the time before midday. There is the Bloody Mary, which provides the perfect start to a Sunday in many households. We need a campaign to ensure whoever the mysterious Big Tom is receives an OBE for services to mixing one more quickly and easily than ever before.

There is always champagne, decent at any point in the day. If you want a swift sparkle, however, I would opt for a Mimosa, with lots of ice and a slice of orange. Mix freshly squeezed orange juice, very dry Prosecco, a generous dash of Grand Marnier and a touch of soda water. It goes incredibly well with a defrosted cheese and onion pasty, made following Olivia Potts's recent *Spectator* recipe. While originally intended for mourning rather than morning, the Black Velvet is said to have been created at Brooks's Club to mark Prince Albert's death. Mixing equal parts champagne and Guinness, it is perfectly fine in a flute but is also a good excuse to use an under-appreciated tankard. In a not dissimilar vein, medicinal qualities might be found in a Bull Shot. As it is a mixture of vodka and beef consommé with hot sauce, Worcestershire sauce, a squeeze of lemon and a dash of salt and pepper, this might be better suited to a winter rather than a summer getaway.

If all this sounds too complicated you could always get some tips from the film *Cabaret*. The heroine, Sally Bowles, enjoys a prairie oyster, combining an egg yolk with Worcestershire and hot sauce, along with added salt and pepper. A dash of gin or vodka is optional. Downing it in one swig is a bit like throwing back an oyster.

This is the way to strike a blow against O'Leary's puritanical world. Why seek to punish those capable of enjoying a bracing pre-noon drink who can also then get onto a plane in a civilised manner?

To borrow from Denis Thatcher you could think of these suggestions as openers, brighteners, snifters or even snortorinos. Life is a cabaret, old chum, and that's worth remembering when you're off on holiday.

DEAR MARY YOUR PROBLEMS SOLVED

Q. I have inherited a small estate which includes a few houses in my village. I was initially very pleased when a friend from my London days saw I was selling one of the best homes and bought it. Now this friend is putting pressure on me to let him fence off a piece of an adjoining field that would give him a much bigger garden and make all the difference to his enjoyment of his house. He is willing to pay whatever I ask. I'm not sure why – but I simply don't want to let him have more land. How can I say no without incurring resentment?
– Name and address withheld

A. It is only natural for you to recoil from any competitively sized properties suddenly manifesting in your own village. However the good news is that, were you to propose this sale to your trustees, they would almost certainly advise against it. Make sure they do this and use their power over you as your excuse.

Q. I come to London every May and hold a drinks party in a friend's flat. My problem is that this year's party inexplicably lacked the buzz and sparkle of previous years. Everyone thanked me and said they had a wonderful time but I could see with my own eyes that the room seemed cavernous and the atmosphere somehow diminished while whole trays of delicious canapés went uneaten. How can I make sure it doesn't happen again next year?
– R.A., Richmond, Yorks

A. What will have happened is that many of your guests will have shrunk physically in size since last year – due to being on fat jabs. This explains the room seeming curiously cavernous. Next year, go through your back catalogue of friends and rake up a few dozen old timers whose extra voices and physical bulk will restore the room to a buzzy capacity. There should be no extra cost as the core friends will be rejecting the trays of canapés and champagne in any case.

Q. Our daughter set up her own rather wonderful business last year. She makes handpainted, bespoke tiles depicting the labradors of clients. She is doing well but some of the invoices have gone unpaid. Since she is a one-man band, it is awkward for her to chase people who are friends or friends of friends. What do you suggest?
– H.P., London SW6

A. To spare her embarrassment, your daughter should open a new Gmail account in a bland, but faintly Sloaney name such as Laura Bennett. Let Laura Bennett do the chasing of unpaid invoices – all by email of course and never by phone. It can be Laura who gets angry if her invoices go unpaid while your daughter can feign ignorance.

Write to Dear Mary at dearmary@spectator.co.uk

No sacred cows

The imperfect, inimitable Rod Liddle

Toby Young

I remember being in *The Spectator*'s offices on a Tuesday afternoon not long ago when I noticed a group of staffers clustered round a computer screen. One let out a guffaw of laughter, followed by another, then another. People sitting nearby demanded to know what was so funny and someone started reading it out. Before long, the entire room was roaring with laughter – proper, hysterical, uncontrollable laughter. Rod Liddle had filed his column.

I was envious, obviously, but also laughing with everybody else. Rod was one of those writers it was impossible to dislike, however successful he became, because reading him gave you so much pleasure. That was true even if you didn't share his politics, provided you had a sense of humour. (Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and George Monbiot were not fans.) I remember him grumbling to me that Fraser Nelson, our then boss, had assembled a group of young staffers to vet his columns, a sort of *Spectator* version of sensitivity readers. This crew became known as the 'Snow Patrol' and were the target of many a vituperative barb in Rod's internal messages. But he needn't have worried. They loved his writing as much as everyone else and he was never asked to change a word.

We didn't always get along. Lloyd Evans and I included Rod as a character in *Who's The Daddy?*, our play about the three sex scandals that beset *The Spectator* in 2004. It was unavoidable because he was the protagonist in one of them, having abandoned his wife on their honeymoon in Malaysia to return to England so he could resume his affair with a 22-year-old who worked for the magazine. He was 44 at the time and his wife, who was also the mother of his two children, wasn't best pleased, writing a series of savage articles in the *Mail*.

Rod was one of those writers it was impossible to dislike, however successful he became

He reviewed the play for the *Sunday Times* – 'a witless amalgam of knob jokes, bum jokes, tit jokes, single entendres, buggeries and blow jobs' – and vowed to punch me in the face if he ever saw me again. When we bumped into each other at a party a few months later he did no such thing of course. Like most scalpel-wielding columnists, he was warm and friendly in person and we buried the hatchet over a bottle of champagne.

One of my favourite memories of Rod was taking him to lunch at Nobu with a rich landowner friend who hoped to persuade him to come shooting. Rod was a passionate animal lover, particularly of birds, and often railed against blood sports in his columns. He was polite and respectful, which can't have been easy, given his depth of feeling, but what really impressed me was his encyclopaedic knowledge of the subject. My friend, who'd made a fortune in the City, thought he could talk him round, being both clever and a bird-loving conservationist himself. But Rod was having none of it. He reeled off statistics like the Radio 4 editor he once was and seemed to know more about the nesting habits of red kites than the grousemoor owner. It was a reminder that beneath the bloke-ish exterior was a man of considerable learning.

Not that Rod was perfect. He was a Millwall fan, after all. But it would be wrong to say he lived by the club's motto: 'No one likes us, we don't care.' After I wrote a column about Caroline getting caught up in a street battle between some visiting Millwall supporters and the police outside QPR's stadium, he telephoned me in some distress and said he and some friends would like to take her to a game to make amends: 'We'll make sure she has a good time, Tobes, and return her to you safely at the end of the afternoon.' She declined the offer, but was touched that he cared what she thought about the club's fans.

He did care because he saw it as his mission in life to stand up for England's white working class, whether in London's Docklands or the north-east, where he lived. It was his hatred of the metropolitan elite's snobbish contempt for that beleaguered demographic that fuelled his best journalism, from ridiculing those academics who wanted to overturn Brexit to howling with rage about the neglect of Britain's former industrial heartlands. He didn't just talk the talk, either, standing as a candidate for the SDP in Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland at the last election.

When Graham Greene first learned of Evelyn Waugh's death he said it felt as if his commanding officer had died. I feel the same way about Rod. Fighting the culture war will be a lot harder without him leading us over the top every week.

Toby Young is associate editor of The Spectator.

MICHAEL HEATH

Sport

Infantino is just the tip of the iceberg

Roger Alton

Watching football work itself into a lather of self-righteousness is never a pretty sight. The English FA is now backpedalling furiously, having sucked up to Fifa top dog Gianni Infantino for years. But if you look back over other recent Fifa head honchos, it is harder to find one who hasn't been implicated in corruption of some sort than it is to find a TV advert that doesn't feature Peter Crouch. There's Joao Havelange; or you may prefer Sepp Blatter of blessed memory; then there's Cameroon's Issa Hayatou; and now of course dear old Gianni. All, no doubt, fine family men but not averse to a bit of skulduggery when it mattered.

There was a particularly stomach-churning snap the other day of the chair of the FA, Debbie Hewitt, smiling furiously while presenting a signed England shirt to Infantino. Debbie, I am sure, is a terrific organiser, though her connection to football seems to be limited to being a big Liverpool fan. Before the FA, Ms Hewitt was chair of something called the Restaurant Group.

Of course Infantino was guilty of insane overreach in trying to flog the World Cup and thanks to the investigative skills of the *Times*'s Martyn Ziegler, his plan was torpedoed in the nick of time. And a good thing too.

Football is now marked out by the Premier League's highly expensive Tunnel Clubs and VVIP hospitality packages

Nevertheless, we shouldn't fall into the trap of believing we're all morally superior. So when Andy Burnham says, 'Let me say this very directly: football does not belong to investors. It belongs to the people who fill the stands and who stand on the touchline week in, week out, rain or shine. The World Cup is not a product; it is the greatest competition in world sport,' full credit to him for being quick off the mark in calling for Infantino to go but seriously, who does he think he's kidding? Football is now marked out by the Premier League's ultra-exclusive and highly expensive Tunnel Clubs (there's even one at Burnham's beloved Everton), by VVIP hospitality packages and by season tickets costing thousands. What happened to the local butcher owning the club? Forget it.

Contrast the bloviating aggrandisement of Infantino and his World Cup auction with the delights of the ultra-local Commonwealth Games, ditched by the state of Victoria and rescued by a rainy Glasgow, which put on a terrific show. But could you watch it live on TV? No. Terrestrial broadcasters chose to ignore it, which is a bloody disgrace. But will anyone say sorry? Of course not.

In my view the Commonwealth Games are a festival of sport, often minority sport, while bigger tournaments like the Olympics (or the World Cup) become festivals of corporate greed and vicious interstate rivalry. (Though fun to watch, of course.) There have been superb discoveries at these games, notably Henry Hobbs on the bike and breast-stroker Filip Nowacki, who dented Adam Ramsay-Peaty's ambitions in the pool. And the dazzling cyclist Emma Finucane picked up a phenomenal four track golds: who wouldn't have wanted to see that live?

The Commonwealth Games are more about individuals, while the Olympics seem to be more about states trying to do each other down. The games are something we should encourage and cherish, not least because one of the stars this year was the mighty Josh Kerr, who was clear of the pack in a strangely uncompetitive mile race and after his world record a couple of weeks ago is pounding his way to being BBC Sports Personality of the Year. The mile record has a glorious past, too, with the spirits of Bannister, Coe and Ovett hovering near the finish line.

As for poor battered cricket, I am looking forward to Flemball. Stephen Fleming, England's latest Test coach, was New Zealand's most successful captain and one of their best ever batsmen, with more than 7,000 Test runs and an average a tick over 40. He was the Kane Williamson of his day: hopefully he will sort out the halfwit shots and England won't be too far off a degree of success in the future.

ANCIENT AND MODERN

Myth the point

Elon Musk, who does not rate Christopher Nolan's film of *The Odyssey* very highly, has said: 'Before this year ends, Grok [Musk's AI] will make a full-length movie of *The Odyssey* that is historically accurate and true to the art of Homer.' Will it, now?

Around 1200 BC the city that Homer calls Troy or Ilium was destroyed by fire and warfare. In 1873, this site (which archaeologists now call Troy VIIA) was excavated by German adventurer Heinrich Schliemann, who announced to an astonished world that it was the well-spring of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

The problem is that there is no evidence at all that VIIA was attacked by Greeks. But there are passages in the *Iliad* which could be said to match some of the features of VIIA. On those grounds, it is suggested that oral poets used VIIA to take advantage of a story about a sack of the city by Greeks to win back the Greek hero Menelaus's wife, Helen, the world's most beautiful woman, who had been seduced away by the Trojan Paris.

The Odyssey was composed some years after *The Iliad* and often looks back to it (the hero's son Telemachus visits old Nestor, Menelaus and Helen to see if they have news of his father).

Over the centuries both poems were sung and embellished by oral poets and some time after the ancient Greeks invented the phonetic alphabet (c. 800 BC), Homer produced the version that has come down to us today.

Since oral poets worked by drawing on earlier versions of the story, our versions of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* contain a centuries-old mishmash of political structures, culture, language, weapons, gods, myths, monsters and so on. So, what would be a 'historically accurate' account of what is obviously myth/fiction? There can be only one answer: a male actor, dressed in 8th-century BC garb, reciting to enthralled Greeks, over a stringed instrument, all 12,109/10 lines of *The Odyssey* in ancient Greek, unless artificial intelligence decides that *The Odyssey* ended at book 23.296 rather than 24.548, as some ancient scholars have argued (on top of raising doubts about other passages too).

Just put a sock in it, Grok.

— *Peter Jones*

Seen elsewhere

Did someone say climate change?

Jim Grenville

As seen in the Daily Telegraph

I am sitting in my living room watching *Songs of Praise*, when a sudden burning smell assails my nostrils. I leap up from my armchair, deposing my poor delicate bichon frisé Wordsworth from my lap. 'WILDFIRE,' I shriek. I had heard the news of thousands being displaced in the South of France, but I never imagined the fires would reach Otford, Kent.

Leaving Wordsworth to his fate, I make for the back door in the kitchen, only to discover the real culprit: my toaster, billowing black smoke. Oh heavens, I must have forgotten. Retrieving the two slabs of solid carbon from the now-defunct toaster, I muse on how, even if I hadn't been about to be consumed by a climate change-induced wildfire, my fear of one raises an important point.

The Conservative and Unionist party, of which I have been a loyal member since the death of the Queen Mother, has a problem. It has abandoned the task of protecting the Earth from higher temperatures at the precise moment that much of Europe appears to be on fire. This may work well for those latter-day Roderick Spodes infesting the dark corners of the internet, but for those of us with televisions, or eyes to look out of the window, we can see that the climate is changing. And not for the better.

If ignoring climate change would mean we could lazily drift down the Isis on punts eating strawberries forever more, then I'd be all for it

Much pleases me about the warmer weather. Here in Kent the sunny spells promise new vineyards, a bounty of English sparkling wine. And I must say I find traditional English summer dress rather fetching. Picture me in my white linen suit and wide-brimmed hat, smiling benignly at those handsome young ruffians in their thigh-length shorts, bronzed by the glaring sun, faces a mask of sweat, those glistering peaches of deepest summer.

If ignoring climate change would mean the maypole dances would never stop and that we could lazily drift down the Isis on punts eating strawberries and cream forever more, then I would be all for it. But look around you. Behold your local park. What was once a green and pleasant land has become brown and baleful, acrid yellow grass but a match strike away from blazing inferno. All for the profit of these oilmen and industrialists, these Gradgrinds who know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

The truth is, a deindustrialised – indeed degrowth – economy would have many attractions. Britain would sink back into a warm, snug, premodernity. Old-fashioned deference would return. Barefooted peasant children would tug their forelocks and doff their caps as I walked by. 'Oi sir, aren't you the one that wroites for the *Daily Telegraph*? Your weekly op-eds sparkle with wit and insight, milord.' As for the newly redundant factory workers, they could just start writing freelance opinion pieces for the *Critic* instead.

'So you see, Mummy, there really is no good reason for a Conservative to abandon the environment. After all, what exactly are we Conservatives trying to conserve?' I stride around the kitchen, as Mother fusses over the remains of the toaster and the black ash which has spilled onto the linoleum, on her knees with the dustpan and brush. I channel Lord Hailsham, thrusting my chest out. 'And so, Mrs Badenoch, you may be the leader of our Conservative and Unionist party!' I wave my hands for emphasis. 'But you cannot tell us! You cannot tell us! Mrs Badenoch you shall not tell us, per George Orwell, to reject the evidence in front of our very eyes, and our very...'

'James, darling, would you give me a moment to sweep this up. Then I'd love to hear what you have to say about "Mrs T" or whatever it is today.'

It is then that the smoke begins to billow out of my own ears, my face turning a violent shade of puce. I will be revenged on you, you appalling little woman. You horrible, grasping little sneak. You will pay for this. I turn to face Wordsworth, who has padded into the kitchen. We exchange a knowing look. We both know what must be done.

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Toss

Modern Toss was invented in 2004 as the label for a series of cartoons by Jon Link and Mick Bunnage. Many use foul language and some are very funny. Under the category of Work, a man says to a person sitting at a desk: 'I think I'll go home. I'm a bit bored.' As often in satire, reality has imitated art.

I assume the title *Modern Toss* coincides in meaning with an entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* from 2007 giving an 'additional sense' for *toss*. An illustrative quotation came from *Viz* for 7 December 1990: 'See this book Tom… Yes, I've read it actually. Yeah. Me n'all. Right load of toss, isn't it. But at 16 quid a throw, he must be coining it in.'

The dictionary, in suggesting an etymology, invokes a letter from 1915 by Lytton Strachey quoted in P.N. Furbanks's biography of E.M. Forster: 'À propos of Maurice tossing himself off… you say – "He knew what the price would be – a creeping apathy towards all things".' But the *OED* also points to the phrase *not to give a toss*, cited from 1876, in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*: 'I don't care a toss where you are.'

Eliot's kind of toss was illustrated by a quotation from Leslie Stephen, Virginia Woolf's father, who in the *Dictionary of National Biography* wrote of Matthew Concanen (1701-49) coming to London with a friend, James Sterling. 'They took to hackwork in literature, and decided by the toss of a halfpenny that Concanen should defend the ministry, while Sterling was to be in opposition.'

But I was annoyed last week by a BBC News website article by Kevin Peachey about 'flipping a coin for a 50/50 chance of £1 million'. Using *flip* instead of *toss* seemed an Americanism. I might wonder whether *toss* was now avoided because of its taboo connotation, but then the Americans speak of *flipping the bird* (an obscene gesture with the middle finger). Whether to say *toss* or *flip* now seems just heads or tails.

— Dot Wordsworth

Win a five-star West End trip to see Tao of Glass @sohoplace, plus an overnight stay at Broadwick Soho

From composer Philip Glass and performer-director Phelim McDermott (*Improbable*), this part-concert, part-performance West End premiere marries ten meditations on life, death and Taoist wisdom with ten brand-new pieces of music and an ensemble of musicians and puppeteers.

This month one lucky *Spectator* reader will win two tickets, plus a luxury overnight stay with breakfast at Broadwick Soho, the West End's most decadently indulgent hideaway. **Visit spectator.com/club to enter.**

Enter by 17 August. Tao of Glass is playing @sohoplace theatre until 12 September 2026.

Join one of our many trips abroad

Buy tickets to our winemaker events

Free Luxury Restaurant Guide membership with Guards Polo invitation

Waived joining fee at Royal Over-Seas League

SPECTATOR CLUB

Go to **spectator.com/club** for exclusive competitions, offers and events

Or would you prefer
something more obvious?

By Appointment To
His Majesty King Charles III
Champagne Supplier
Pol Roger & Cie
Epernay

CHAMPAGNE
POL ROGER

PROUDLY UNDERSTATED
since 1849